Tom Wickham
Corn Grower

Carl Brandt

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By
Carl Brandt

Illustrated by Fred J. Arting

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Tom Wickham, Corn Grower

CHAPTER I

BAD NEWS OR GOOD?

"But, Pop, this bulletin *proves* that you can get a hundred more pounds of tobacco to the acre if you'll plant where the drainage is good!"

Big Chris Wickham raised his eyes from the newspaper he had been laboriously reading and glanced at his fifteen-year-old son. He was a grizzled man of fifty, strong, unbent by the years of toiling in the fields for his living. Honest and just, an elder in the church, he looked every man in the eye proudly — yet he held book learning as of little worth and was secretly contemptuous of those who did not work with their hands. Now, as he looked at his son, a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"Still tryin' to learn the old man new tricks, my son? I reckon I know as much about plantin' as them as writes books to learn foolishness to people who ought to know better."

"They don't learn out of a book, Pop; they learn by planting too! They have a wonderful place out at the State Farm and — and they make a lot bigger crop of everything than we do!"

"I reckon so. I — reckon — so," drawled the boy's father. "And it costs 'em twice as much to make. Throwing boughten fert'lizer around like 'twas nothin'. That ain't farmin'; it's plumb riotous livin'!"

The boy gave up, knowing that once again he was beaten. Ever since he had learned to read, he had been fascinated by the bulletins that Uncle Sam sends to the farmers to tell them of the new methods and discoveries that tend to make the farmer's life easier and more profitable. Time after time he had tried to enlist his father's interest, in the hope that he would try some of the experiments, only to come up against the firmly-rooted prejudice to anything new, which had been and is the hardest thing

the Agricultural Department has to contend with.

Tom knew his father's ambition. It was to own a farm of his own — a place that would be a permanent home. All his life he had been a tenant — a man who farmed a section of a big plantation, paying with a portion of his crops for the rent of his house and the privilege of working. Invariably, during the years, when his goal was nearly in sight, when out of unremitting toil he had almost wrested the savings that would buy a place, a bad year would come, his crops would fail, and the savings would melt before the fire of necessity. Tom knew of this, and his reading led him to believe that the cure was in the increase of production through scientific farming.

As these things ran through the lad's brain he was conscious that his father was laying down his paper. Tom looked up to find the older man's eyes again upon him. A sudden sinking of the heart told him that his father's words would be unpleasant.

"Your schoolin' is about over for the year, Thomas!" was what he heard.

"Why?" burst from the boy.

"Spring's here and I figger you're big enough to be right smart help to me this year. Reckon we can put the sandpit field in corn —"

"But — but, Pop, school doesn't stop until June and — and I — I've got to keep on!"

"How so?" inquired the father, patiently.

"Because — because — Oh, because I've just *got* to, that's all. I — I want to learn and *be* something, not just a *tenant* all my life!"

Tom had hit a vulnerable spot in his excitement. If he had stopped to think, he would not have thrown up to his father his failure in life. As it was, the shaft went deep into the man's heart and hurt as it went. But cruel as it was, perhaps after all it was the only thing that could have got for Tom what he wanted so desperately — the chance to keep on at school.

"No — no," said Big Chris slowly. "No, ye don't want to be a renter!" He clenched his fists. "Ye reckon that schoolin' is going to keep ye from it?" His tone showed his disbelief.

"I do!" cried Tom. "I know it! Oh, Pop, please let me go on. I'll work like sixty after

school to make up for it! I'll do just as much as if I was home all day. Please!"

"Ye can, then," said Wickham, gruffly. "But I aim to work ye mighty hard — I reckon ye'll certainly wish ye weren't tryin' to farm an' get schoolin' too."

With this he stalked out of the room, knowing that he had been worsted, and chagrined that the wound made by an impetuous word from his son had softened him and made him lay down his defiance against "book learning."

As for Tom, his heart rejoiced as he stumped his way over the rutty road to school the next morning. Life was very good. Winter was over, the ground was soft and gave out pungent odors. The quail had begun to whistle their spring refrain, "Bob White — Bob — Bob White," and last night, just before he had slept, from far off in the distance had come to him through his open window the first sad-glad song of "whippoorwill."

Besides the joy that spring brings to a boy, Tom's special reason for thanksgiving lay in the fact that he was not to be denied school and the companionship of the boys who were his

chums. Not even the certain knowledge of the hard work he would have to put in for his father could take the keen edge off his happiness.

Although Tom Wickham took the school he went to as a matter of course — it was the only school he had known — it was far from being an ordinary institution.

In the first place, the teacher was Edward Moseley, the owner of Crossways, the plantation of which Tom's father rented a portion. If great upheavals had not come during the former's lifetime, his lot would have been that of a successful planter, not that of a country schoolmaster.

But the Civil War broke out when Edward Moseley was yet a senior at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. He had gone there as the heir to Crossways, in those days one of the great plantations of Virginia, being only twenty miles from Richmond. When, reluctantly, Virginia seceded from the Union, to the building of which she had given so greatly, young Moseley laid down his books and, with every other member of his class, took up the sword. He fought in the losing battles of that

grim war of brothers until one day a minie-ball found him as its mark. The wound — it was in the leg — rendered him unfit for further service and he came back to his patrimony. That which he had left in the full flower of prosperity was now a sickening waste of desolation. By some chance the Big House, built of brick that had been brought a hundred years ago in sailing vessels from England, had been left intact. His parents had died, broken-hearted over the struggle, and only a sister was left to him.

She came to keep house for him, and with her help he took up the almost impossible task of wresting a living from the soil. Before the war, with cheap labor, the harvests had been plentiful; but in those dark days of reconstruction, when labor could not be had, there was famine — even for the laborers.

It was hard pulling, especially so for this man, whose whole life was bound up in the books he had so hated to leave when the war broke out, yet somehow, almost miraculously, he succeeded in keeping the house and providing enough to eat. By selling some of the

timber, renting portions of the place, even by doing what almost broke his heart to do — letting parts of the plantation go to strangers — he managed to exist and keep up most of the traditions of his family.

The school had been an outgrowth of the tenant system he had inaugurated. During the hard years of reconstruction little thought was given to the public schools. Mr. Moseley saw the children of his tenants growing up in ignorance, and built his schoolhouse primarily to take care of them. The enthusiasm and love of teaching that he brought to his work were so great that soon the fame of the little school went abroad. This brought applications from people throughout Virginia, and even beyond, asking that their boys be taken by Mr. Moseley. Thereafter, each year, the Big House sheltered as many boarding scholars as its hospitable roof would cover. Having the boys around the house had probably filled the aching gaps that must have been in the hearts of both brother and sister, for during all these years of struggle neither had found time to marry.

As Tom Wickham jumped the pasture fence

of the home farm, he thought of how patient and painstaking Mr. Moseley had been with him. And, he reflected, at times he must have tried his teacher's patience badly, for until the possibility had arisen of having the privilege of school taken from him, he had not appreciated what he was getting, and he remembered clearly many brēaches of discipline for which he had been responsible. By the time he arrived at the stables and was approaching the knot of boys in front of the schoolhouse, he was in a mood of repentance for past sins and filled with a desire to do much better in the future.

His own feelings, however, were swept away when he came up to the other boys. It had struck him as curious that they should be so quiet — usually there was a ball game or some form of active pastime going on until the first bell rang — but soon he knew the reason. All were grouped around Bob Hazard, a boy from New York, who, with Ned Moseley, the teacher's nephew, made up Tom's own little band of chums. They were chorusing their condolences for something that had evidently happened to Bob. Brushing through the crowd, Tom put

his hand on his friend's shoulder and demanded:

"What's wrong, Bob?"

"Everything," was the dejected answer. "I've got to stay here all summer!"

"What? You going to stay here? Why, I thought you and your father were going on a long cruise!"

"We were; that's just the tough luck of it. Brother Eddy (this was the name by which Mr. Moseley was affectionately called) has just heard from Dad. He said he had to go to Russia on business at once and he did not like to take me out of school. He wanted to know if I could stay here if he did not get back by the middle of June. He won't get back, though; not — not until 'way after school has opened again!"

"I bet he will, too!" defended Tom. "Don't you think so, Ned?" He turned to the other member of the triumvirate and noticed that the rest of the fellows had scattered, leaving only the chums together.

Ned nodded his assent. "Sure, old man, that's the right idea. Your father will get back just as soon as he can, I know!"

The disappointed boy looked gratefully at his friend and realized that no matter how deep was his hurt, it was a tiny thing compared with what Ned had to go through each day. For Ned Moseley was a cripple — one leg was gone. It had happened some years before, but Bob knew that his chum still suffered from the handicap fortune had imposed upon him. Not that Ned Moseley by word or deed showed that he suffered! On the contrary, his spirit was indomitable, and almost from the first he had contrived ways and means by which to overcome his deficiency. He had learned to do all the things the other boys did, played their games, competing with them on equal terms. He was a better woodsman than any of them and a better shot with either rifle or shotgun. During a day's hunt he could cover more ground on his crutches than his companions could on their perfectly good legs. The only thing he feared was their sympathy.

In the instant that Bob looked at him, all these things flashed through the Northern boy's brain and he was ashamed that he had shown how deeply he felt his disappointment. After

all, it was a small thing when compared with real tragedy. So, with a little shrug, he said:

"Sure he will. I'd rather looked forward to our summer, that's all. But it could be a lot worse, Ned — suppose you and Tom weren't going to be here; then I would have some reason to kick."

"No such chance," answered Ned a little bitterly. "We're here all right."

"And glad of it," Tom added. "Especially since our bunch isn't going to be broken up. If Big Chris doesn't work me too hard, I'll show you some fun — Crossways isn't such a worse place in summer. You've only seen it in the winter, old boy!"

Bob choked down the obvious retort to this last remark. Already he had begun to realize what the new plan for the summer held in possibilities of sport and adventure. He decided that if he could be with Tom and Ned, he really *wanted* to stay at Crossways through the summer.

CHAPTER II

PLANS

"Well, what are we going to do with ourselves all summer?" asked Ned as the inseparable three lounged away their recess under the big locust tree. It was a day or two after the fateful news had come to Bob Hazard. Even such a short time had brought a measure of reconciliation to his fate.

"Oh, I reckon we'll swim and go fishin' and all the other things fellows generally do," drawled Tom, who was lying on his back, watching the clouds drift across the blue sky.

"Sure, we'll do all that, but I was thinking that we ought to do something with an object to it, like building a log cabin or fixing up some wild turkey blinds for next winter —"

Here Bob interrupted: "You mean that you think we will get sick of doing just what we want to do? Is that it, Ned?"

"Yes, I reckon that's about the size of it. Do you figure that way, too?"

"Well, *I* won't have that trouble," grumbled Tom. "I had to promise my father that I'd work like a dog before he'd let me stay on at school — and I've got to make good. I don't see where I'm going to get much time to play around with you two."

"Cheer up," Ned urged. "Big Chris's bark is much worse than his bite. But, seriously, what do you think of my idea?"

"Good stuff," answered Bob. "Let's build a canoe and paddle up the South Anna River. We'll be explorers!"

"Bully! But I suggest that a log cabin that we could fix up as a clubhouse would be more fun, because we could use it all next winter, and the boat wouldn't be much use then. But Tom hasn't been heard from. Haven't you an idea, old boy?"

The latter only grunted. But a moment later he sat up suddenly. His whole manner was changed. From being mildly interested and passive, all at once, under the urge of the plan that had come to him, he was alive and enthusiastic.

"You bet I have!" he ejaculated. "Let's make a crop of corn!"

The other two boys were more perplexed than surprised.

"Make a crop of corn?" echoed Bob. "Why, that's *work*. I don't see any fun in *that!*"

"You're crazy!" was Ned's comment.

"Wait a moment — wait just a moment," begged Tom. "Don't go off half-cocked. It's a good scheme —"

"Perhaps it is," conceded Ned Moseley, "but you'll have to *show* me!"

"I don't mean just to go out and make an ordinary crop. Of course, that wouldn't be any sport, at all," said Tom. "What I want to do is to plant and cultivate our corn as they do at the State Farm. I want to show these farmers, including Pop, that when they throw away the Agricultural Department's bulletins they're throwing away real money! It makes me sore to think that the State Farm can raise one hundred and seventy-five bushels of corn to an acre and that the best average we get around here is about twenty bushels! I'll bet that we can do a lot better than that, and if we *do*, p'raps it

will shame some of the folks into trying something besides the farming methods they brought with 'em out of the Ark!"

Perhaps it was the sporting element in Tom's proposal, but the idea found favor with his two listeners. Heretofore, anything to do with farming had been drudgery, but dressed up with the frills Tom had given it, the proposition seemed to have all the elements of a good game. Seeing that he had made an impression, Tom went on:

"Besides, fellows, if we are successful, we will make money! Quite a lot, too, because we ought to be able to put in about five acres, amongst the three of us —"

"I can get Brother Eddy to give us the land!" said Ned, suddenly, breaking in.

"You want to do it, then?" asked Tom.

"You bet!" was the emphatic answer. "It sounds like a barrel of fun. What do you think, Yank?"

Bob Hazard let the nickname pass. When he had first come to Crossways School, he had fought half the boys over the name, for he had felt that it was necessary to uphold the dignity of the Union in this hotbed of Southerners. Hav-

ing had his just share of success and a like amount of beating, a truce with honor had taken place. Since then, especially from Ned and Tom, it had been a designation of honor.

"Count me in. And, it may help to know that Dad sent me an extra amount of spending money. That ought to help for necessary expenses, fertilizer, and so forth."

"You fellows are bricks!" was Tom's comment. "We'll make things hum. But do you realize that we'll have to start plowing at once?"

"Sure. But the days are getting so long we'll have lots of time after school. But here's a difficulty. Where will we get a team?"

"Let's make Pony do a little work for his living," chuckled Bob. "Ever since Dad sent him down here we've just ridden him."

"But do you remember when we tried to hitch him to a buggy?" objected Tom. "And what happened to the old buggy?"

"You bet I do, but it will be fun to *make* him plow. He can't break the plow up much. Although he's a Texas cow pony, it won't hurt him to be useful!"

Ned had been thinking as the conversation had proceeded. "But, Tom, none of us know how to grow corn the new way. How are we going to learn?"

"That's easy. We'll write to the Department of Agriculture and they'll send us all the dope there is on the subject. The last bulletin I saw said they would."

"I'll write to-night, then, if you want me to—"

"The quicker the better," was Tom's reply.

Ned wrote, but when a week had passed without an answer, the boys decided that they must, at least, get their land in order, as valuable time was slipping by. Plowing was the same operation in either modern or old-style farming, so special instructions would not be needed for that. The only thing necessary was to get the land to start on.

The same day the three boys waylaid Mr. Moseley as he came out of the schoolhouse.

"Uncle Eddy, we want to rent some land from you," said Ned Moseley.

"What say? You boys wanting to rent some land!" the old man exclaimed.

"Yes, sir!" they chorused.

"But — but I can't quite rightly figure for what purpose you want to *rent*," Brother Eddy commented. "You have the run of the whole place now — "

"We know it, sir," interrupted Bob Hazard, forgetting his manners, "but we are going to farm — and every farmer has to pay taxes or rent; otherwise his profits would not be properly figured."

"You going to farm?" asked the old man, incredulously, remembering the lack of success that had met his efforts to interest these same boys in the regular farm activities. "What led to this decision, may I ask?"

Ned quickly outlined the plan they had conceived. When he had finished, his uncle nodded his head in approval.

"Yes, it's a good idea. Excellent. It is very important that everyone should have some serious occupation each day. Very important. But to tell the truth I don't just know what field I can give you."

"How about that patch at the old quarters?" suggested Tom, who knew good land. This field

was the most productive of any that Mr. Moseley still worked. The cabins of the slaves had stood there before the war. Now only one cabin remained to keep memory alive — and to store farm tools.

"Not that piece. I am figuring on putting that piece in oats this year. Let me think. . . ."

A moment later Ned broke out: "I have it, Uncle Eddy! Let us use Bear Island! You know you never put anything in there except a stand of hay and we'll pay you enough to make up that loss."

"You're crazy, Ned. We don't want the Island," Tom objected quickly, before Mr. Moseley could answer. "It's the lowest field on the farm and every freshet that comes along plays the dickens with it. A good-sized thunderstorm is enough to swell Little River to the point where it floods the Island. One deluge and where would our corn be?"

"Tom's right," said Brother Eddy.

"It's not quite so bad as that," retorted Ned. "I know that the possibility of freshets makes it risky, but I figure that the heavy spring rains

will be over by the time we plant our seed corn and there is better than an even chance through the summer. Besides, the soil down there is so rich it will not take much fertilizer, and we ought to be able to raise a whopping crop!"

"If you decide to take the risk, you can have the land, boys," said Mr. Moseley. "And, come to think of it, I reckon it's about the only piece I could let you have to experiment with this year. Let me know what you decide."

He started to walk towards the house, when Bob spoke.

"You haven't told us what the rent will be, Mr. Moseley."

"I don't want anything. You can have —"

"Thank you a whole lot, sir, but we'll have to arrange some terms," insisted Bob. "Why not say you'll take a part of the crop?"

Brother Eddy saw how earnest they were and decided he must play the game. "All right," he agreed. "I'll take one-fifth of your crop, but only with the understanding that, should the total yield per acre be more than forty bushels, my maximum would still be eight bushels. Will that do?"

"Great!" agreed the boys.

Ned was pleased at the way Tom and Bob had backed up his idea of the Island. The danger of freshets was only one more factor in the game to make it more exciting, and therefore more fun.

"Bully for you!" he said as Mr. Moseley left them. "We can beat any old freshet that comes along!"

CHAPTER III

DELAY

"I don't think much of your old Department of Agriculture," said Bob Hazard peevishly. "How long has it been since you wrote to 'em, Ned?"

"About ten days, I reckon. But perhaps they are mighty busy just now—"

"Bob's right!" put in Tom Wickham shortly. "They should have answered our letter. All the bulletins I've read said they *wanted* folks to ask for information."

But Ned Moseley came back to the defense with spirit.

"You fellows are in too much of a hurry. I'll bet a pretty the Department gets a million letters a day and they can't just pick ours out to answer right off the bat. Don't worry; the answer will come along all right."

"Perhaps so!" This from Bob. "But I

think we ought to write again and hustle 'em up. Don't you, Tom?"

"Sure. Ned, you're the writer, get busy and tell the folks in Washington what we think of 'em. Then, when school's out, we'll go over to the postoffice and mail it. Perhaps our letter is there waiting for us now. Then we won't have to mail the second one."

They had found a chance for this talk at recess time and in accordance with Tom's plan, the early afternoon found them legging it to the little railroad station, which was also the postoffice. They chose to go by way of the river. This route was infinitely more exciting than the road. That the trail beside the river bank was a mile farther, worried them not at all. The part of the farm lying along the river was well known to them. Almost virgin forest, it held opportunities for trapping and hunting that no other portion of Crossways could offer. Here, during the winter, they had snared rabbits and had once almost bagged a wild turkey.

As they came on the scene of each former exploit or adventure, it had to be discussed and

re-lived. Once a fresh deer track caught Ned's keen eye, and they turned off to follow it, hoping to flush the shy beast. However, after a half hour's exciting work, they found the track led back to the river and was lost, leaving them considerably further from their destination than when they first discovered it.

At last, however, they came to the railroad and found the station-agent-baggageman-porter-postmaster sleeping peacefully in a chair tilted against the wall, the warm afternoon sun streaming into his face. He was short and rather fat, but had a well-known temper.

"Shall we wake him?" asked Ned, who was a bit tender hearted.

"You bet!" said Bob. "Go ahead, Tom, shake him up."

"Do it yourself, Yank," was the reply. "I've seen what sort of a look he gives Mrs. Taylor when she punches him awake during the sermon. I don't want my head taken off!"

Luckily, a freight train whistled down the track and the sound was enough to disturb the slumbers of Mr. Taylor. He wriggled a little and blinked his eyes. Before he could close

them again and relapse into sleep, Bob shouted:

"Hello, Mr. Taylor! Got any mail for us?"

This woke the postmaster.

"Who — who be it? Oh, it's ye, is it? An' how's everybody over to Crossways? I reckon I ain't seen none of ye since last meetin'. Br'er Eddy well? An' Sis Elly?"

Mr. Taylor was no exception to the usual rule of village postmasters. He was the local newspaper and he lost no opportunity for gathering news. As the boys answered his flow of questions, he tramped into his boxlike little station and opened the cupboard which was the postoffice.

"Well, well, I could 'a' taken oath there was a letter here for ye this morning, Ned," he said, as he ran through the letters.

"Isn't it there now?" demanded Tom, anxiously.

"No, don't see it," was the reply. "But sho', I give it to Ben Parkinson 'fore noontime. He said he reckoned he'd go home along by Crossways. That's what I did, I recollect now."

It is a common thing in the outlying country for anyone and everyone to be pressed into

service as a postman. It is frequently the case that no one can be spared from the farm work to go for the mail and the neighbors are always willing to go out of their way in order to deliver a letter.

"We'll go back by Ben's, then," said Tom. "I reckon he stuck it in his pocket and forgot he had it. What do you say, fellows?"

"All right!" was the verdict.

"But I think we ought to send our second letter anyway," added Bob. "If Parkinson has the letter we want, it won't hurt that this one is mailed, and if his letter is not from Washington, we won't have lost a day."

"That's right too," assented Ned. "Here it is, Mr. Taylor. Get it off on the first train north, please."

The trio left in much better spirits than they had come. They kept to the road on the way back and finally reached Parkinson's house, which was about a mile from Crossways. Ben Parkinson was in the barnyard. When they demanded the letter, he said:

"I've just come back from you-all's place. I forgot the letter, but just as soon as I remem-

bered it I went over. It's waiting for you over there."

Before the words were fairly out of the man's mouth, the boys had started for home.

"Gee, it must be from Washington," panted Bob. "I feel sure it is!"

"We've waited long enough," was Tom's contribution. "But it might be a letter from Ned's girl. What about it, Ned?"

"Oh, shut up!" was all the reply the remark received.

They burst into the house and found the letter lying on the horsehair sofa in the hall. Ned snatched it up eagerly and tore it open, the others waiting expectantly for his next words.

"Oh, shucks!" was the exclamation that brought disappointment to their ears. "Shucks!"

"Isn't it from Washington?"

"Not so you could notice it!" replied Ned, laughing.

"What *is* it, then?" demanded Tom.

"Remember I wrote for that gun catalog? Yes? Well, they write to say they would 'be pleased to fill my order if I have decided which

of their wonderful guns I can least do without!' I reckon that's some come-down from what we expected!"

They all laughed to hide the very real disappointment each felt. Somehow, not getting the letter they wanted seemed to take away a little of the enthusiasm they had worked up for their project. The thing ought to move fast — they wanted to know how they should start to work. The letter would tell them, they were sure, and it would be a solid basis on which to plan their campaign. After a moment's hesitation, Tom Wickham broke the silence —

"It will come to-morrow, fellows. I vote we don't worry about it. Come along, now, let's help Brother Eddy milk."

But the next day brought disappointment too. Someone went to the postoffice during the morning and at recess the trio learned that no letter had arrived. So thick did the gloom settle about them that when school was out they had no desire to find some pleasant way of spending the afternoon. Until the dinner bell rang they sat on the fence by the schoolhouse and discussed their rotten luck. Tom was trying to

keep up their spirits as much as possible by brave words and was in the midst of a sentence when he broke off suddenly —

"Why, who's that? Look — a buggy is stopping at the front gate!"

"Come on; let's find out," cried Bob, leading a dash through the front yard. They reached the gate before the newcomer had got out of his conveyance. He smiled as the boys came up.

"This Crossways, fellows?" His pleasant voice was brisk. "Yes? That's good. I'm John D. Elwood of the Department of Agriculture."

CHAPTER IV

JOHN D. ELWOOD

For a moment the boys were speechless. Then Ned said:

"Why — why, you must be the answer to my letter!"

John D. Elwood chuckled.

"I am! But I hope I'll be more use than just a letter. I take it from your remark that you are Edward Moseley, Second? And these are the others you mentioned as prospective partners in your farming venture?"

"Yes, sir." As he answered, Ned immediately warmed to this young man, who had not by so much as a look revealed any surprise at finding him to be a cripple.

"That's fine! Fine!" Elwood repeated. "We can get to business right away. But I reckon I'd better pay my respects to your parents —"

"It's not my parents, sir. The place belongs to my uncle. I'm named after him. Bob Hazard and Tom Wickham here are going to school to him. Come right up to the house, sir. I should have asked you before!" The inherent hospitality of the Moseleys suddenly awoke in the boy and he felt ashamed that he had let a guest discuss business before he had been properly welcomed. He turned to Tom. "You and Bob take Mr. Elwood's horse to the barn, like good chaps. Come, Mr. Elwood." Then he led the way up the path to the Big House. When they reached the porch, Brother Eddy was waiting on the top step.

"Crossways is proud to welcome you, sir." This was the formula which had been used to greet every chance wayfarer, as well as invited guest, since the house was built. During the life of Brother Eddy's father the dinner table was set each day for as many as could be crowded around it. Then a servant was sent to sit on the gate post and blow a horn to tell the world at large that dinner was ready and that all who heard should come. The hospitality of Crossways was mighty real.

The agent of the Government was installed before the crackling pine fire in the chamber before he was allowed to state the object of his visit.

The chamber in a Southern house is the living room, the place that is used as a common meeting ground of the whole household. Usually it is the bedroom of the head of the family, whose bed in the daytime stands in one corner of the room. The chamber in which Elwood found himself was typical. Ceremoniously Mr. Moseley introduced him to his sister, a sweet-faced, faded lady, dressed in the styles of half a century ago.

"Well, sir, do we owe it to fortuitous chance," Brother Eddy was saying as Bob and Tom came in after seeing to Mr. Elwood's horse, "that you are our guest?"

"Not quite that, Mr. Moseley," answered the young man. "I came in response to a letter from your nephew."

"I am glad, sir, that dinner will soon be served," put in Miss Moseley, without reference to the conversation. "You must be famished, sir, after your drive." Sister Elly's great mission

in life was to see that everyone had plenty to eat.

"I am, madam," replied Elwood, with a smile that completely won the lady's liking. "And if I am at last to taste some of your mango pickle of which I've heard so much, my happiness will be complete."

Miss Moseley blushed delicately, and decided that it had been a long time since she had met so nice a young man. It was by the manufacture and sale of the delicacy to which Elwood had so tactfully alluded, that Sister Elly had helped keep Crossways Plantation in the Moseley family.

"You shall have some, indeed," she said, rising. "If you will excuse me now, I will see to dinner!"

When the door closed behind her, Mr. Elwood turned to Mr. Moseley.

"It was the letter from your nephew stating that he and two other boys wanted to get all the information they could of our method of growing corn, that brought me here. By *our* I mean the Government Agricultural Department, to which service I belong!" He said the last

proudly, as if he were reporting his membership in a famous regiment.

"But why did you take the trouble to come all the way here? Couldn't you have written the boys all they wished to know?"

"Perhaps. But when we find that the interest in growing things comes from the boys themselves, it is our pleasure to take any trouble to keep it alive and make it grow." He turned to the boys, who were hanging on his every word. "You boys are the farmers of to-morrow, and if we can teach you the love of the soil and the passion of making two blades grow where one grew before, we are enriching the future!"

The three prospective farmers felt a new surge of enthusiasm flow through their veins. Elwood was stimulating their imaginations. They saw their scheme, which had been planned for amusement, suddenly become a thing of immense seriousness. But Elwood was continuing.

"Why, Mr. Moseley, do you know that in the fifty odd years since the Department was founded, the Government has spent nearly a hundred million dollars to help the farmers?

And do you know that their hidebound ideas have almost wrecked our campaign?"

"Yes, sir. I find that to be the case. I should confess, also, that I personally have not given the Government the coöperation I should."

"I can readily understand, Mr. Moseley. You have had other interests besides your farm. But, sir, we have started on a new line, and the results so far are extraordinarily encouraging. We have organized farming clubs of the boys in each state — supplied them with all the assistance possible and offered prizes for the best crops grown. By this we hope to succeed with the next generation, although we have failed with the present. Besides, there is an educational value to the scheme which will appeal to you, I feel sure. In scoring the results it is not the boy who grows the largest crop that wins, but the boy who grows the largest crop *and* writes the best account of how he made it! Another factor is the accounts that are kept of the expenditures and receipts. You see, in this way we hook up both reading and arithmetic to the practical work. What do you think of the plan?"

"It is excellent. I told the lads so to-day when they rented a piece of ground for their experiment."

"They have gone that far? Fellows, that's great! We can count on you for support, then, Mr. Moseley?"

"Surely, sir, surely. I think it is a very important work you are doing. Very important." His eyes twinkled. "May I ask, sir, is it your intention to shame the grown-up farmers by having the boys make bigger crops right beside them?"

Elwood laughed heartily.

"You've hit it! And in many cases it's done just that—"

The peal of a bell rang out. Mr. Moseley rose.

"Come, Mr. Elwood. That means dinner!"

"Thank you, sir." Then he spoke to the boys. "Well, fellows, I've been talking so much, you haven't had much chance to tell me anything, but after dinner will be your turn. I'll want you to show me the field you've picked out."

Always well loaded with good things, to-day

the table fairly groaned under the weight of food Sister Elly had brought out in honor of the guest. She sat at one end, presiding over the roast of beef, and Brother Eddy at the other, the home-cured ham in front of him. The boys could not remember a meal when a ham had not been on the table. It was a custom, a tradition. Besides, a sliver of it gave a pleasing contrast to Sister Elly's famous pickles.

Mr. Elwood was helped generously to the latter and declared they were even better than the reports he had had of them.

"I wish I could induce you to send some as an exhibit to the next fair we hold," he asked her. "I feel sure that they would take the Grand Prize — they would without a doubt, if I did the judging!"

"I shall think about it, sir," returned Miss Moseley, quite overcome, "and if I do I hope you will be judge."

When at last the meal was over, the boys took Mr. Elwood in charge and tramped down to the piece of low ground Brother Eddy had rented them.

"This is Bear Island," they informed him.

"But it's not an island," exclaimed Elwood. "There's no water around it!"

"There is every time a freshet comes along," explained Tom Wickham. "On two sides of it flows the river, and a deep gully bounds it on the shore side. This gully fills up even after a hard shower. That's why we have to keep this little bridge we're now passing over."

"How did it happen to be called Bear Island?" the man wanted to know.

"Oh, that was a long time ago. During a very heavy storm the flood waters drove a bear out of the swamps and it took refuge here. Brother Eddy's — I mean Mr. Moseley's — grandfather happened along and got a great scare, as bears were very seldom seen in this part of the country. He went back to the house for his gun, but when he reappeared Brother Bear had moved. There was so much argument as to whether Mr. Moseley had really seen a bear or not, that the name stuck!"

Elwood laughed. "That's as good a way as any to get a name; and the name will have nothing to do with the crop of corn." He looked the place over carefully and then went

on: "You chaps ought to make a bully crop here if the soil is as fertile as it seems to be. What was planted here before? Looks to me like clover and timothy hay."

"Yes, sir. Last year Uncle Eddy put it into clover and made a whopping crop. The year before he tried alfalfa, but a freshet ruined it, so he turned it under before planting the clover." It was Ned who made the explanation.

"That's great. Couldn't be better preparation for a corn crop. Every field should be planted in clover, alfalfa, cowpeas, or something like that, the year before corn is tried, as the soil gets tired of growing the same thing year after year. It exhausts the ground of the chemicals which planting other crops will renew."

"Sort of a self-fertilizing scheme, isn't it?" asked Tom.

"Exactly. And much more valuable than artificial fertilizing. The best plan is a carefully worked-out schedule of the different crops a field should bear. We call this 'rotation of crops' and while we know in a general way what rotation is desirable, each farmer must use

his discretion about applying it to his fields. Different soils are as different as human beings and must be given only the things which will agree with them. A crop whose roots dig deep should alternate with one whose roots spread, and a crop that consumes a large amount of nitrogen should follow a crop that uses a lot of potash. The best results, as far as corn is concerned, are obtained when corn is planted no oftener than every fourth year, preceded, as I have just said, by a crop of alfalfa or clover, which will restore the necessary nitrogen to the ground. But, anyway, your ground is in the best possible shape, so you won't have to worry about that. I would, however, give the ground a dressing with manure just before planting your seed. Don't be afraid of putting it on too thick; the field will stand it. It is much more valuable, with the present condition of the soil, than the manufactured fertilizer you buy."

"When should we start work?" Bob wanted to know.

"Right away; the sooner the better. Get what manure you can and then plow. But what about seed corn? Have you any?"

"No," answered Tom. "Dad just picks out the best looking ears for his. But I know that is not the right way, because a bulletin I've got at the house says that kernels from each ear should be tested."

"You are quite right," returned the farm expert. "Unfortunately it's too late now for you to do it. I'm going to send you enough tested seed from the State Farm to plant this patch. Next year, however, you must select your own."

"But how is it done?" asked Tom, deeply interested.

"It is a long process and the books I'll send you will give it to you in detail. Now, I'll just sketch it out to you briefly. It's one of the most interesting things we have to do."

"Go ahead!" encouraged the boys. "And don't be too brief," added Tom.

"All right, then. The time to select the ears you will get your seed from is just after the ear is fully developed and when the kernel is only beginning to get hard. The corn is still standing, of course, and the leaves and stalk are yet green. We have learned that perfect ears taken

from a hill out of which three stalks have matured are better than ears from a single stalk. This shows that the corn was hardier, that it was able to compete in the struggle for life and still succeed. The seed from these ears is more valuable than from the ear which has grown on a single stalk. The latter had nothing to impede its growth and the seed is likely to be lazy."

"Gee!" ejaculated Tom, "corn is just like folks!"

"More so than many people think," returned Mr. Elwood, smiling. "But, to go on: Usually the kernels from fifteen ears are sufficient to plant an acre of corn — but you had better count twenty to allow for seed that is not fertile. After you have collected a sufficient number of ears to plant the area you plan for next year, the problem is to care for it during the winter months. A matter of great importance is that this seed corn should dry out evenly and thoroughly, and only second to this is to keep it from the invasion of rats."

"I'll bet you found a way," Bob said.

"We did, and it's not expensive either. It's done by stringing the ears together, one below

the other, and hanging them from the roof of the barn. That overcomes both of our difficulties. This is the way." And with a stick he scratched a rough diagram on the ground.

"This keeps the ears from touching and allows the air to circulate freely. It is the best scheme we've hit on so far."

"The farmers 'round here just throw the best looking ears in a bin any old which way," said Tom.

"And they make about twenty-five bushels to the acre, don't they?"

"Yes — sometimes!"

"That's one reason for it, then. . . . Now, suppose we've brought our seed corn through the winter safely and it's only a few weeks to planting time. The thing to find out now is which of our ears are fertile and which are not. This is the real testing of the seed and marks the greatest single advance that has been made in the cultivation of corn. We call it germinating the seed.

"You should make a box four feet square and about six inches deep. Then drive tacks in the edges at intervals of four inches. Take

a ball of string and connect the tacks, so that you have divided up the box into one hundred and forty-four squares — like this — " Again Mr. Elwood had recourse to the ground as a sketching block.

" Now, from the first ear to be tested, take six kernels, being sure to select them from different parts of the ear. Put these in the square numbered one, after having covered the bottom of the box with an inch of sand. Lay the ear aside, marking it No. 1, to correspond with the square in the box, and so you will know it again. Do the same with the remaining ears until you have your box full.

" The next thing is to cover the seeds in the box with about three inches of sand. Moisten this thoroughly and put the box in a warm place. Keep it well moistened, and by the sixth day you will be ready to make your examination. On that day the fertile seed should have sent out sprouts, which should have attained a growth of from three to six inches, and each ear will be represented in its own square.

" Some will have six hardy shoots — you can safely use that ear. Others will have only four

or five and some of them won't have sprouted at all."

"It will be a simple matter then to pick out the strongest and best ears," put in Tom. "You just select the ear that has the same number as the square in the box and keep it for seed if it has sprouted well."

"Exactly!" agreed the Government agent. "And that's all there is to testing seed corn. When I tell you that the farmers could increase their yield per acre by at least five bushels by doing this, even if they did not change their old methods a bit further, wouldn't you think they would take the trouble?"

"You bet! But they don't," returned Tom. "They don't do *anything!*"

"They will in the future, though," said Mr. Elwood, "because boys like you are going to show them what can be done if only a little trouble is taken. But let's go on with the immediate problem. I'm going to send you seed, so the next thing is the planting. I'd advise you to do it by hand, because it is much surer, although more work."

"We don't mind work," asserted Ned stoutly.

"It's not a picnic, exactly, even on a bare five acres," said Elwood, with a smile.

"I *know* it isn't," chuckled Tom. "That was my job before Pop bought a horse planter."

"I guess you do, then," returned Mr. Elwood, joining in the general laugh. "But let me tell you about planting. Make your hills about three and a half feet apart and each row that same distance from its neighbor. Plant five kernels to the hill, taking care that each seed is separated from the others. This will give enough room to each stalk."

"Yes, sir, and when do we start to thin it out? You don't let all five stalks grow, do you?"

"No, not more than three ought to mature. Start to thin the weaker shoots when they are from six to eight inches above the ground. If you do it with a hoe, be sure you cut the stalk underground. It will grow again if you don't. Pulling it by hand is harder work, but it's lots surer — then you get roots and all."

As they were talking they moved over to the bank by which the river ran. Mr. Elwood looked at it a moment and then said:

"You fellows have every opportunity to make a whopping fine crop. Your ground is right and the seed I'll send you will be good. But you are taking a big chance that this river will rise and flood the island and with it all your hard work, for once the river has flooded your growing crop, it's ruined. The banks are very low."

"We've thought of all that," said Ned earnestly, "and we think it's worth the risk. Anyway, it's the only piece of land we can get."

"Well, if that's the case, all I can say is 'Good luck to you!' Of course, I think your chances are as good as even that no freshet will come along. But should one come along before you have planted, it will be worth money to you, for the new earth it brings is rich and is almost as good as fertilizer. But I understand there have been years when there has been no trouble?"

"Yes. Last year was one, and two years before that was another."

"Don't worry, then," advised Mr. Elwood. "Work hard and you won't have time to bother about it. You'll see if I'm not right. Well,

then, I guess I've told you all I can now. I'll send you the seed and as many helpful books as possible."

"That will be fine," Tom said. "And — and if we have luck and do well, are there any prizes that we have a chance at?"

"You bet there are! There will be a blank for you to fill out showing how you raised your crop, how much it cost, and how much profit you made. When this is filed at Washington, it becomes the basis on which the prizes are given."

"We are going to do our best to win," asserted Bob Hazard.

"I know you will," returned the man. "It's the boys of to-day, like you, who, just because they try hard enough, are going to show what real progress can be made in farming!"

When Mr. Elwood drove away late in the afternoon he left the boys more enthusiastic than ever about their project.

CHAPTER V

A SURPRISE — AND WHAT IT LED TO

But the boys did not start work as soon as they had planned. The day after Mr. Elwood had left it began to rain. For three days it poured and the only comfort they got out of it was summed up in Bob's remark:

"I guess there can't be very much more up there by now, fellows. P'raps we'll be safe for the rest of the year!"

After school, the afternoon of the third day, when the sky showed some signs of clearing, the boys went down to what they already referred to as their "Farm." It was a discouraging outlook, for all they could see was an expanse of reddish-yellow water with a few disconsolate trees holding their branches above the flood, like women crossing a mud puddle.

"Shucks," exploded Tom, "it's all right. This little flood is worth dollars to us — Mr.

Elwood said so! It will leave a deposit of rich earth that is the best of fertilizers."

"Sure — sure," Ned and Bob confirmed, eager to buck up their failing spirits.

"But it looks pretty punk right now, all right," added Bob, doubtfully.

"Cheer up, cheer up, old boy. It's better to have it now than after we'd plowed it all. . . . The only thing that worries me is that we can't work for a week, even if the rain stops to-night. The river won't go down until then. What shall we do in the meantime?" It was Ned who spoke.

"Well," said Bob, "Pony needs breaking in to a plow. Suppose we try him out in Brother Eddy's garden? It needs plowing, and it's so well drained that the ground will be ready by to-morrow afternoon."

"Righto! That will be sport and we won't lose any time fooling with that li'l' horse when we can start down here. Come on, let's go back to the house."

During the following week Pony did learn to plow and the kitchen garden was broken up, but both looked rather the worse for it. Pony

— a cayuse from Texas, who had never allowed anything but a saddle and rider near him — wore a deep look of hurt and humiliation. The garden was as much plowed by flying hoofs as by the plowshare. It took a disc harrow and the solemn team of grays to make it look respectable.

But one day Pony got a respite. The mail brought notice that a shipment of freight awaited Bob Hazard at Doswell, the nearest freight station. A few minutes after, Pony was loping along with Bob on his back to find out what it was all about. An hour or so later he brought Bob back. The boy's face was glowing and his eyes sparkled.

"What was it?" Ned demanded. "Out with it at once!"

But Bob would not tell. "It's a surprise and it will be here to-morrow," was all Ned could get from him. "Besides, I want Tom to be on hand, too, when it comes."

The next morning, while the boys were in school, a two-horse wagon deposited a strange load down by the river that ran through the low-ground pasture. When recess came, Bob

led the way down the hill, followed by his two chums. When they came in sight of the unwieldy box, Ned shouted:

"Oh! A canoe!"

"Gee whiz, that's great for you, Bob," said Tom Wickham, a little enviously. It was hard for him not to be, for life had not given him much in the way of luxuries.

Bob stopped short and turned on his friend.

"Look here, Tom; don't go wrong on this. Dad sent this down as a present to you and Ned. It isn't mine at all. I can't get in it even, without your permission."

"Ours!" exclaimed the other two in chorus, scarcely believing their ears. "Why should he send it to us?"

"Because I've often written him of you and the things you've done to show me a good time here. He knew that we wanted a canoe and he thought perhaps it was the best way he could show his gratitude. But we're wasting time talking. Let's uncrate it!"

He had brought along an axe, so it was not many minutes before the graceful canvas craft was lying exposed in the sun.

"Great day in the morning, but it's a peach!" was Ned's heart-felt comment.

"And to think it's ours," added Tom. "But while you are here, Bob, it ought to be *yours!*"

"I guess not!" was the emphatic reply. "I'm going to be a passenger and only come when I'm invited."

They all laughed. Then, "Let's try it," suggested Tom.

"Can't. Recess is about over and you know what Brother Eddy would say if we were late," objected Ned.

"To-morrow's Saturday, fellows. Let's wait until then and take a long trip," was Bob's advice. "The river is still up and we can cruise all over creation."

"Suits us. To-morrow it is!"

Luckily, nothing happened to interfere with this plan. The rain had upset Big Chris Wickham's plowing, so Tom was free to make the first voyage in the *"Hazard."*

He and Ned had so christened the canoe, not in honor of Bob, they were careful to tell him, but in honor of his father. Besides, they expected many adventures to come from its

possession, and the name was therefore appropriate.

The river was still out of its banks, but it had receded enough so the current was not too swift to navigate. Bob was the only one who knew anything about paddling, so when they started he had the stern paddle. But boys do not take long to get the knack of doing things they want to do, and before they had gone very far both Ned and Tom were able to give a good account of themselves.

Down Little River they paddled, the current helping them greatly. The flood water made the going easier than it would be ordinarily, as it lifted them over many of the jams of tree trunks and driftwood that encumbered the stream when it was within its banks.

When they reached the fork where Little River flowed into the South Anna, this juncture making Bear Island, Tom exclaimed:

"Say, fellows, we're right over our farm! About three feet under us is the field on which we will grow the biggest crop of corn Hanover County ever saw!"

"It doesn't look now as if we would ever

grow anything but a crop of crawfish!" Ned answered dryly.

But the coming of the *Hazard* had cheered up the trio immensely and their good spirits could not be dampened even by the large amount of surplus water that had swamped their field.

"Which way shall we go now?" Tom asked.

"I think we ought to go upstream," was Bob's counsel. "If we buck the current now it will be easy coming back. We'll have to paddle against the current from this point back to the pasture anyway."

"Right you are, Captain," agreed Ned and swung the light craft up the South Anna.

After they had gone a mile or two, they struck country which was beyond the limit their explorations on foot had ever taken them. They felt the thrill of all explorers, exclaiming over a queer tree formation, feeling important when a new view was discovered. Livingston, Scott, even Columbus himself, never experienced more intense emotion than did the trio when a fork of the river disclosed an unexpected branch leading to the right. Instinctively the canoe was headed that way.

"Keep quiet, men!" whispered Bob. "Not a sound from your paddles. *They* are on the watch!"

The others fell eagerly into the game. Along they went as stealthily as possible, darting from bank to bank, brushing under the half submerged trees.

At that moment each boy knew that the woods were full of hostile Indians, and that the slightest noise on their part would mean instant death. They were scouts, returning to civilization after a long trip. It was all real to them; it was playing the game as it should be played.

Ned Moseley was in the bow. As they turned a bend he held up his hand suddenly and began to back water.

"Ssh-sh!" he warned in an excited whisper. "We are right on their camp. We must reconnoiter!"

They pulled the canoe to the shore and disembarked. Then, crawling across the point of land, they saw what Ned had discovered.

On the opposite bank a cliff of rock went up perhaps fifty feet and at its base there was an opening which seemed to be that of a cave.

Drawn up on the bank was a dugout canoe with one paddle in it. A half-dead fire still smoked lazily and from the branch of a tree a flannel shirt was hung.

"Let's get out of this and talk it over. It looks mighty funny to me!" whispered Bob. The others followed him to the canoe. Once aboard they let it drift with the current until they felt sure they could not be heard from the cave.

"What was your idea in coming away?" demanded Tom of Bob. "We could talk it over all day and still we'd simply *have* to go back to the cave to find out what's up. So why didn't we just go to the cave and find out while we were there!"

"But supposing the man didn't want to see us?" returned Bob.

"What difference does that make? And he couldn't eat us, could he? Probably it's some hunter or a hobo! It looks to me that we haven't much spunk — to run before we're hurt!"

"Hunting season's over," said Ned, "and it's too far from the railroad for a tramp. It seems

"Ssh-sh!" Bob warned in an excited whisper. "We are right on their camp!"

to me that the mysterious man is just as likely to be an escaped criminal as anything else!"

"If he *is*," said Tom, the romance of this explanation appealing to him instantly, "then we had the right hunch when we left so suddenly. If he knew that his hiding place was discovered, he would beat it before we could get the sheriff here!"

"But why get the sheriff?" Ned asked. "The three of us ought to be able to capture him without help—"

"And we wouldn't have to divide the reward with anybody!" Bob Hazard finished the sentence for him. "If he is a criminal, there is sure to be a reward!"

"We can do it," Tom asserted. "We'll leave the sheriff out of it and use a little strategy in his place. The man probably has a gun, so we'll have to surprise him — but we'll plan it all out later."

Surprised, Ned asked: "Why don't we go back now?"

"He's not going to move." Tom's tone was assured. "He doesn't know anybody's found his den, so he'll stay there until we come to

get him. But he isn't there now, or we'd have seen him. We've got to frame up a scheme, and there's no reason why another day isn't as good as this for carrying it out."

As there was no logical answer to this, they paddled their way home. On the way they talked over their adventure from every angle, and the more they talked the more exciting the thing seemed.

It was almost dusk when they got back to their starting point. After the canoe had been brought up and housed for the night, Ned made a discovery.

"Fellows, that mysterious man has made us forget to eat our grub!"

Simultaneously pangs of hunger assailed each boy. They sat down right there and did justice to the lunches they had brought along. They were taking no chances that supper would not be waiting for them at the house.

CHAPTER VI

BEAR ISLAND AND BIG CHRIS

Before he left, Mr. Elwood had impressed upon them the importance of spreading natural fertilizer on the land before the ground was broken. The letter of instructions which he sent after he left Crossways also advised it. Tom found out that Big Chris had only as much as he could use himself, and there was none in the neighborhood for sale. But Ned had an idea, and without further ado put it into effect. Meeting his uncle coming from breakfast one morning, he stopped him.

"Uncle Eddy, the cow pen ought to be cleaned out, don't you think? When I was milking this morning I noticed —"

"Yes — you're quite right," was Mr. Moseley's rejoinder. "It is very important that it should be attended to, very important; but I certainly can't see just how. The teams are all needed on the Mill Forty."

"Could — could we have the manure if — if we cleaned out the cow pen?" Ned stammered in his eagerness.

For a long moment the decision lay in the balance. Brother Eddy knew that he could use his natural fertilizer to great advantage himself, yet it would be some time before he could move it. But what really won the day for Ned was the latter's eagerness. Brother Eddy lavished a great affection on his orphaned nephew and, as a soldier, appreciated the lad's bravery. He decided to let the boys have what they wanted, yet he chose his words carefully in order that Ned should not suspect he had been swayed by other than economical motives.

"All right, Edward, it's yours if you think it's a fair exchange. Perhaps I should pay something besides."

"No — no!" exclaimed Ned. "Thank you! And — can we borrow the light wagon? The cart's too heavy for Pony."

As the boy swung off on his crutches to tell his chums of their windfall, Brother Eddy looked after him and smiled tenderly.

But when they had cleaned the cow pen of its

fertilizer, the boys found that it did not cover the field very thickly.

"I reckon it will have to do," observed Tom, as the last load was dumped.

"'Specially as we can't get any more," laughed Bob. "But this will help. Now for plowing."

It took two of them to plow with Pony. Usually one person can handle a team and a plow, but in this instance it was different.

The little horse had become somewhat used to doing what was expected of him, but every now and then a sense of the grievous insult that was being put upon him would stir his Texan indignation and a pretty little exhibition of buck jumping would take place. After peace had been restored, the land in the near vicinity would look as if a forty-two centimeter shell had just exploded.

But a means of combating this had been found. Bob discovered that Pony would behave much better if a saddle were strapped to his back, as well as the collar and traces. Also, as soon as the little horse showed signs of disturbance, if someone would climb in the saddle for

a time it would restore to some degree Pony's self-respect. Accordingly, one boy would man the plow and the other drive Pony, ready to leap into the saddle at a moment's notice.

Most of the time Tom and Bob would do the plowing, for, while Ned could follow and guide a plow in spite of his crutches, it was a little too much for him on a long stretch. Ned, however, was a wonderful hand with a grubbing hoe and he attacked the sassafras bushes and scrub pine that had encroached on the field.

The river had gone down so rapidly that they had not been able to go back up the river and carry out their design of capturing the man of the cave, as plowing took all their spare time. The venture was, however, their chief topic of conversation when they were alone, and a thousand plans for accomplishing their purpose had been suggested and rejected. They had kept their own counsel and no one suspected that they were harboring a secret.

The delay was vexatious, but they comforted themselves with the fact that the dugout canoe must have meant that their quarry had been in his present hiding place for a long time. A

dugout is not made in a day. Therefore, it seemed likely he would stay where he was until they got their crop planted. At any rate they decided that they would have to take this chance.

When the plowing was done, the boys hired Brother Eddy's team of grays and the disc harrow for a day. After this machine had gone over the island twice, the ground was as soft as a feather bed.

"I hope it doesn't rain before we can get our seed in," said Tom. "We'd have to harrow it again if that happened."

"Cheer up; it won't," Ned said with a smile. "Luck's with us, don't forget that!"

"A lot luck has to do with it," growled Tom, who was tired, yet he had to smile at Ned's unfailing good nature.

"Where's the seed Mr. Elwood sent us, Ned?" asked Bob. "At the house?"

"Yes, and it's just as well, for we couldn't do much more this evening. It's almost dusk now."

"We'll get at it early in the morning."

The job of planting the seed was as hard work, or even harder, than Mr. Elwood had

led them to believe. In the first place, they found it was something of a job to lay out the hills on the measurements suggested by the farm expert, but at last Bob Hazard, with the aid of a fish line, solved the problem.

"The rows should be three feet six inches apart," stated Ned, who had learned Mr. Elwood's instructions by heart, "and each hill the same distance from the next one. By this method we can cultivate the corn both ways — along the rows and across them!"

"Right you are," returned Bob, "that's what I've done. Let's finish the measurements and then we can put the seed in."

This did not take long after they got the hang of it. Then Bob and Tom each took a row and planted the kernels by hand, five to a hill, leaving an inch or so of space between them. Ned followed with a hoe and carefully covered the seeds with loose earth. As he worked he sang a negro corn planting song:

"One for the blackbird,
One for the crow,
One for the cutworm,
And two for to grow!"

He kept up the refrain until Bob Hazard could stand it no longer.

"For the love of Mike, change your tune!" he shouted. "No crow is going to have any of this."

"Keep your shirt on, old man," returned Ned. "Before you get through this field you won't care if I sing or cry. Here, hoe a while, and I'll drop some."

By changing jobs in this way some measure of relief was obtained, but it was an exhausted trio that tumbled into bed that night, a little over half the field planted.

The following morning found them back on the job, however, and by late afternoon the job was finished.

"Whew!" whistled Tom, straightening up, "I'll never get this crick out of my back!"

"I'm sure glad this much is done!" exclaimed Ned wearily, resting on the handle of his hoe.

Bob sighed his assent, as he looked over their five acres, now all planted. It was good to see and good to know that they had not faltered until the last kernel was dropped.

"Some job we took on, boys," he commented.

"You said something then," Tom Wickham ejaculated, as he joined them. "And it's going to be some more job before we get done with it. It's good fun, though, isn't it?"

"For one, I'm mighty glad we took it on," said Bob. "We'll show these old mossbacks —"

He was interrupted by a hearty roar of derision. The boys turned to find Big Chris, Tom's father, splitting his sides with laughter.

"Ho-ho!" he roared. "So ye young limbs be goin' to show us mossbacks how to farm! Ho-ho! Why, ye idjits, if ye stick to it that long, ye'll be mighty spry to harvest five bushel an acre." Suddenly his mood changed. He became grave, almost vindictive. "Goin' to learn how to farm out o' a book — why don't ye put spectacles on the little hoss so's he kin plow a straight furrer? I saw the furrers afore ye harrered — they was as straight as a rail fence, pretty nigh. But I don't hold none with this here stunt. Seems like it's 'most disrespectful to me. You, Tom, are you figgerin' to show up your Pop as a mossback? Answer me, sir!"

Tom did not know what to say. If he told the truth, Big Chris was capable of forbidding

him to have anything more to do with the experiment. If he lied — but he couldn't lie. He kept still and said nothing. However, Ned stepped into the breach.

"No, sir," he began, "we are not trying to make fun of you. What we are trying to do is to show you that more corn can be grown to the acre than is being grown now." Ned hurried along, seeing by Big Chris's face that the storm was about to break. "And we're going to do it. We're going to raise not less than a hundred bushels an acre right here this season!"

"What?" bellowed the old farmer, his rage diverted for the moment by this staggering assertion. "A hundred bushels? I never did better'n fifty in my life. It can't be done!" His excitement was getting away with him. "Why — why, ye young limbs, ye can't do it, I say!"

"We will, all the same," put in Bob.

The older man's fury was intense. He lifted his clenched fists in the air. "If — if 'tweren't that I be an elder in the church, I'd bet with ye, danged if I wouldn't! I — I won't bet, but if

ye crop what ye said, I'll — I'll go to one o' them agricult'ral schools come winter, dang me if I won't! And — and if ye don't — you Tom, ye won't never go inside a schoolin' house again. Ye hear me?"

With this the huge farmer strode across the edge of the field and disappeared in the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER VII

THE ATTACK

The only effect that Big Chris's outburst had was to fire the boys with a keener determination to succeed.

"I tell you," said Tom, "things have *got* to come right for us, because I'm certainly going to keep on at school! It will be easier if Pop approves, but even if he doesn't I'll not let that stop me. I'll earn my own way if necessary."

"That's the talk!" Bob backed him up. "You'll get there all right."

Ned snickered.

"What's so all-fired funny?" demanded Tom.

"Won't it sure be funny to see Big Chris going to school?"

"I don't think it will be funny," was the answer. "It will look pretty good to me! And to see it, we'll just *have* to make Bear Island bring us more'n a hundred bushels an acre."

"It will, don't worry about *that*." Bob's voice was confident. "But there isn't anything more that we can do right now, is there?"

"No," returned Tom, whose knowledge of practical farming came in handy at times, "there's nothing to do until our seed comes up. Then we must thin out the weaker shoots, leaving only the strongest. After that we will have to cultivate it over and over again. Why did you ask?"

"Because I thought it might be a good time to try to catch the man up at the cave."

"That's a good plan," put in Ned Moseley. "We've left him alone a long time now — I hope he hasn't flown the coop!"

Tom thought a moment and then said:

"I've been thinking quite a lot about that stunt up at the cave, fellows, and the more I think of it, the crazier the thing seems."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bob.

"Well, how do we *know* the man is a jailbird?"

"More likely that than anything else," defended Ned, who had thought of the escaped criminal explanation first. "And if he is,

there's almost sure to be a reward for his capture."

"But we're not *sure* about the reward," persisted Tom, "and if we monkey with an innocent man, we're likely to get in a peck of trouble."

"All right, then," said Ned disgustedly. "Let's give it up and go paddling *down* the river. Perhaps we'll see a mud turtle or two — and we can call that an adventure. What's the use of an adventure, anyway, if you don't take a chance?" he finished heatedly.

"Keep your shirt on, old boy," Tom said, patting his irate friend on the shoulder. "I've meant to go all the time, but I just wanted all of us to understand what we're tackling. If we're going just for a lark and are willing for the man up there to have the joke on us if he turns out to be harmless, all right."

"That suits me. How about you, Bob?"

"Right! When shall we go, Tom?"

"Friday afternoon. We'll tell the folks that we're going to camp out overnight. Probably we'll need two days for the job."

Tom Wickham spoke authoritatively. Little by little, as the boys had been welded closer

together by their common interests, he had assumed the leadership by right of that strange law which gives to one person in any selected group the ability to command. Perhaps it was so because the idea of the farm had originated with him, perhaps because he was the strongest and sturdiest, but mostly it was because his was the personality of leadership. The other two boys realized what had happened, yet, so gradually had the change been made, that it was an established fact before they made any kick. Now it was too late and, to tell the truth, they were satisfied the way things were.

Then Tom took up the task of getting the expedition's plans in order.

"We will have to try to overpower our man, guilty or innocent, I reckon, if we are going to tackle the stunt at all, and it seems to me that there is only one possible plan to follow."

"Let's have it!" demanded Bob.

"Well, it's this, then: I believe when we get up there we will have to lie quiet until our man goes away from his cave. Then we must get inside and wait until he returns."

"And we'll nab him as he sticks his head into

the cave!" finished Ned. "That sounds good to me — it's much better than any of the things we've talked over."

"I believe it will work," was Bob's contribution. "It seems a simple enough scheme. I'm for it — strong."

"All right, then, that's settled," Tom concluded the conference. "Be ready to start right after school Friday. We ought to be there before dark. Bring some food and a blanket apiece. I'll get a length of rope to tie up our prisoner — in case we get him!"

As arranged, the expedition started on Friday afternoon. The boys stowed away their luggage on the *Hazard* and paddled up the South Anna. Since they had begun to work on their farm they had moored the canoe at Bear Island, where it would be handy. It was still a good hour before sunset when they located the beginning of the stream they sought. Strangely enough, the freshet had mixed up the geography of the place so much that it was almost a mile from the point they had entered it on the flood water, and it turned out to be more of a swamp than a stream. It wound in curves, almost doubling

on itself, and many precious moments of light were wasted before they located the cliff of rock which marked the abiding place of their quarry.

As soon as it was in sight they advanced cautiously, pulling their craft along by the bushes and trees, rather than paddling. At the first hint of dry land they left the canoe, concealing it as much as possible by the underbrush. Then, with great caution, they went forward until they found a point from which they could observe all that went on at the cave.

"He's still there," whispered Ned, "for there's his dugout. That means he must be home; I bet it will be a long wait for us."

It was. But it was not long before they had something to look at besides the quiet landscape, for presently a figure emerged from the cave, stretching luxuriously, as if having just awakened from a nap.

"Great day!" whispered Bob fervently, "he's sure husky."

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall," came Tom's reply. He knew that he would have to hearten his band of adventurers, for the first sight of their adversary was not one

to bring great confidence in an easy victory.

Bob was right. The man was husky. Standing an easy six feet, when he raised his hands the blue flannel shirt fell away to reveal tanned arms, superbly muscled. His face was covered by a soft brown beard, evidently the growth of weeks. Stained corduroy trousers and high laced boots completed his costume. The boys watched as he built up his fire and put some potatoes in the ashes. From these preparations each boy was sure that their chance would not come that night — that the cave man was settled for the night.

But this did not prove to be the case, for suddenly the object of their interest went to his dugout, stepped in and pushed off. When the dip of his paddle grew faint in the distance, Tom spoke in a low tone:

"That's lucky for us. Probably he's gone to pull a net he's set or see if he hasn't trapped a rabbit. Up with you, fellows; it's our chance to get into the cave."

The little band scrambled to their feet and followed Tom to the cave. Although dusk was settling fast, they got a good idea of the inte-

rior and it surprised them. It was as comfortable as such a place could be. In one corner a bed of broomstraw had been made and covered with an army blanket. Near the entrance a comfortable rustic chair had been constructed out of elderwood. They knew it was comfortable, for upon spying it, Ned had flopped into its depths, giving forth a contented sigh. But the thing that interested them most was the discovery of half a dozen books lying on a natural shelf of rock.

"Funny kind of criminal who escapes with a library!" said Bob. "It looks as if we might be in wrong."

"Well, he's probably got friends who give 'em to him," retorted Ned. "The fellow's got to have someone outside to tell him the news and get salt for him once in a while."

Bob was silenced. As it was almost dark by then, Tom distributed his forces in the best strategic positions. Giving the rope to Ned, he said:

"When our friend shows up, Bob and I will tackle him. As soon as he is on the ground, you slip the noose over his feet. Once his legs are

tied, we've got him. You, Bob, stay on this side of the cave and I'll be on the other. Remember, let him pass you before you spring. Aim for his legs. I'll go for his neck."

"Right you are!" answered Bob and Ned, although their hearts were beating wildly. "We'll be on the job."

"Good," was the firm reply. "Now, no more talking — and keep your eyes skinned!"

The group was silent. Each boy, even Tom himself, was excited almost to the point of fear. As they talked, night had fallen and it was dark. The moon was late and the loneliness of their dangerous position was accentuated by the weird noise the croaking of a million frogs launched on the night air.

"There he is!" whispered Ned, whose keen ears had caught the dip, dip of the paddle.

"Sh-ssh!" warned Tom.

Now that the crisis was almost upon them, the nervousness that had been the result of the long wait passed and each lad comforted himself with the determination to do his best.

Dip-dip, gurgle-gurgle. The dugout was coming closer and closer. Then it scrunched on the

gravel and the solitary figure in the stern rose, disembarked and pulled his craft up out of the water.

The boys tingled with intense excitement. The fire, which had died down during the man's absence, suddenly flared up and they saw him throw a fat rabbit on the ground. Then, straightening up, he started for the cave's opening.

"Now!" said Tom to himself. "Now for it!"

A second later all was pandemonium. Perfectly timed, the boys sprang and bore down on their quarry. He fell heavily and grunted as he struck the earth.

"Quick, Ned, the rope!" shouted Bob, who was clutching the long legs of the prostrate man.

"Coming," said Ned, who was in the rear of the cave.

But at the moment he was about to slip the noose over their prisoner's legs, the fortunes of war changed. From having things all their way, as they thought, suddenly the cases were reversed.

Evidently the stranger had waited until his breath had fully returned, to make a supreme

effort. Now he acted. All at once he exerted every muscle and twisted his body to one side. Tom, who had been sitting on his shoulders, was thrown off, and Bob and Ned, who were manipulating the rope, were dashed aside.

Seizing his momentary advantage, the man scrambled to his knees before the avalanche of boys was again upon him. From this position he was fighting on more nearly equal terms and was able to take care of the lads as they attacked. The cave was so narrow that the boys got in each other's way and many a blow was wasted on account of the dark.

After a few moments of useless scrimmaging, Tom, like a wise general, called his forces off when he realized that things were at a deadlock.

"Beat it, fellows, beat —"

At that moment a last blow from the stranger sent him sprawling out of the cave's mouth. Almost before he stopped rolling, Bob had helped him up and they were racing in the direction of the canoe. It had been agreed that it was to be the rendezvous should anything go wrong.

The race through the night air brought Tom

from the daze the blow had caused. As his faculties came back, he stopped short. "Where's Ned?" he demanded. Bob tried to urge him on, but with no success.

"We — we both started when you gave the word. Likely he's at the canoe waiting for us. Come on, let's see. You know Ned can *fly* on those three legs of his when it's necessary. Don't delay; we've *got* to get out of here!"

There seemed nothing else to do, so the two boys went on.

When they came to the hiding place of their craft, Tom called Ned's name softly, thinking he might have concealed himself in the vicinity. There was no answer.

"Ned's captured!" Tom said shortly, trying to keep the dismay he felt from his voice. "We deserted him!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE DESERTED CHAMBER

For a long moment both boys stood still, letting the terrible truth sink in. At last Bob stammered:

"Why — why — we both started when you gave the word, Tom, then — then I had to help you up and I forgot about poor old Ned!"

"I know it wasn't your fault," said Tom. "It was mine —"

"How could that be?" retorted the Northern boy. "You were dazed — you had enough to do to look out for yourself."

"I should never have let him come to the cave. He should have stayed by the *Hazard* and covered our retreat. But that's enough crying over spilt milk. We've got to get busy and rescue him."

"You're not going to try and do it now, are you?" asked Bob, incredulously. "Don't you

think we'd better get back to the Big House and tell the folks what's happened?"

"And waste all that valuable time? Not on your life! We've got to do *something* and do it quick, because we don't know what that fellow will do with Ned."

"You don't think he'll hurt him?" put in Bob anxiously.

"A desperate man is likely to do anything," was the emphatic answer. "I'm not going to take any chances." Tom hesitated a moment. "Perhaps it would be a good plan if you'd take the canoe and go back for reinforcements, but I'm going to stay."

"I'm staying too, if you are," asserted Bob stoutly. "What's the first thing for us to do?"

"I want to find out what's happened to Ned. That means we'll have to get close up to the cave again."

"Couldn't we circle around and come out on the edge of the cliff overlooking the cave? If anything is to be seen, there's the best place to see it from."

"That's a bully idea," Tom Wickham approved. "Come on, let's be moving. We can

plan the next thing to do after we get the lay of the land."

Rapidly they made a wide half-circle and after a successful struggle with the briers and underbrush they found themselves near the edge of the cliff.

Until then, Tom had led the way. Now he stopped in his tracks waiting for his companion to catch up. When the latter was abreast of him, Tom pointed ahead and whispered:

"Think we'd better crawl from here to the edge," and, suiting his action to his word, dropped to his knees. "Quiet as you know how," was the admonishment Bob got as his chum wriggled forward into the gloom. A moment later, he was following Tom's wake to the great discomfort of his hands and knees.

Then a strange thing happened. Tom disappeared before his eyes! Bob was sure that he had never taken his gaze off the blurred form of his leader, yet it was the unmistakable truth that Tom was not in front of him! He choked down an almost uncontrollable impulse to cry out, realizing that if he did he would give away his own whereabouts to the man of the

cave. That would not help any of them. Deciding then that the best course was the forward one, he crept along. Just about the spot where he had last glimpsed Tom, the scrub pines grew thicker, making the path pitch black. But still he advanced, brushing under the lowest branches. Suddenly, without warning, his hands felt no earth and the ground under his knees slipped from him. A terrifying moment that seemed an eternity ended in his thudding against something soft.

"Ugh!" escaped from the obstacle that had impeded his fall. "Look out where you're going!"

It was Tom, using what little breath he had left to protest.

"I — I — couldn't help it!" returned Bob, "I —"

"Of course you couldn't, old man," chuckled Tom. "You were lucky, though. *I* didn't have a soft bolster to fall on when I tumbled."

"But where are we? What is it?"

"My guess is that it's one of the trenches that were dug for the defense of Richmond during the war. The pines have overgrown it

and they hid it from us. It's a likely place for one — Sh — Sh, now. I'm going to the edge of the cliff and see if we are over the cave."

Bob sat still and heard his friend clamber up the other side of the pit they were in. As soon as he reached the top, his form was silhouetted against the sky. A moment later he was back.

"We're a hundred yards away from the right place," he announced. "We'll have to keep on to the right."

"The trench will be a help then," suggested the boy from the North. "We'll be able to walk upright. My knees will be glad of that. I'll bet they are raw and bleeding now."

No more time was wasted in talk. As quietly as possible they moved along the hollow the Confederate soldiers had been forced to desert when the attack had become too hot. Perhaps some of the courage that the desperate gray-clad men possessed came back to comfort the two lads, for they went along almost light-heartedly on their adventure. They knew that it was not child's play that they were facing, but something serious — something which was as likely to mean complete disaster as success

and glory. Yet they did not falter. Ned, their chum, was in the hands of the enemy and no effort or risk was too great to be undertaken in his rescue.

"Ouch!" came in a muffled tone from Bob, who was now leading the way.

"Shut up!" hissed Tom. "Quiet, you crazy galoot! We're right over the cave!"

But instead of instantly complying, Bob retorted in a shrill whisper: "Come here, quick!"

When the other came up, he was puzzled greatly, for all that he could see of his friend was the upper half of his body.

"Where are your legs?" was his first demand.

"In a hole. First thing I knew, I'd stepped up to my waist —"

"But what are you standing on?"

"I'm not standing. I'm stuck," was the somewhat indignant response. "I can't feel any bottom, but I can kick the side of the hole. Hurry, Tom, give me a pull out."

Tom tugged and Tom pulled, but Bob was tightly wedged. At last, however, persistence brought about the desired result, and both boys

were seated, panting hard after their exertion.

"I — I don't think it was a very friendly thing of Johnny Reb to leave such a pitfall," complained the Northern lad, "I might have broken a leg — "

"Wait a bit," returned Tom Wickham, "wait a bit. I am just wondering if that *was* a pitfall — "

"What else could it be?"

"It might have been dangerous for Johnny Reb to go down to the stream for water, by way of the cliff face — "

"You mean — "

"I mean that it might have occurred to him to dig a tunnel, particularly as the cave down there would help. If I'm right, perhaps we'll get old Ned away without losing our scalps. As soon as I get my breath I'm going to find out."

The desire to follow out the new possibility evidently hurried the return of their wind, for hardly a moment later Tom was investigating the hole Bob had discovered in such an original manner. The latter was squirming his way to the edge of the cliff to verify Tom's theory that they were over the cave's entrance. Coming

back he reported that the stronghold of Ned's captor was only a few yards away.

"Good," commented Tom. "And I've found that the hole is big enough for a man to get through. You got caught on a root! I'm going in and see what I can find. Will you wait and keep watch?"

"Not so's you could notice it. I'm coming along too."

"All right, then. But let's be going."

Tom let himself slip into the hole feetforemost. Just as his head was about to disappear, the motion ceased.

"I can touch bottom," he whispered before he ducked into the earth. Bob followed and found himself in a bottle-shaped chamber, which was hardly large enough for the two boys at one time. As the inky dark made their eyes of no use, the boys felt until they found the opening that possibly led to the cave.

Bob discovered it. It was close to the floor and cluttered up with rubbish, but the work of a few moments was sufficient to clear a passage which could be managed on all fours. Once through the opening, the boys found the going

easier, although the slope of their path was sharp.

Not until long afterwards would either Tom or Bob own up to the fear that they experienced going through that tunnel, although it was eërie enough to make the heart of a strong man quail. The dark, the moist air that had filtered through the cold earth, the uncertainty as to what was to come, all combined to dampen their ardor. Yet on they went, sometimes on hands and knees, at others crawling, making themselves as small as possible in order to win through.

Then gradually the path broadened and grew level. Finally Tom stopped as he could not touch either wall. Evidently they had come to the cave level. He dared not even whisper to Bob, because there was no way of telling whether the strange man of the cave was close or not. It was a relief when he felt a groping hand touch his arm and close on it. Finding Bob's face with his free hand he put his fingers over the other's mouth to emphasize the necessity for absolute silence. Then, holding each other close in order not to get lost in the dark, they started forward again.

At that instant a noise throbbed through the silence. Stiffening, each boy strained his ears for a possible repetition. It came, a muffled, strained disturbance, bearing some relationship to a human voice indulging in a caricature of a laugh.

It was sufficient to deflect Tom's footsteps into the direction from which he thought the sound had come. With one hand holding tight to Bob and the other stretched out into the murk, he stepped out gingerly.

Before his hand came in touch with something solid, the queer noise again assailed the silence. This time it seemed a cry of pain.

"Ned's being hurt!" was the thought that leaped into the brain of each boy.

A moment later, Tom's hand touched a damp wall of rock and a sigh of relief came hissing through his teeth. At least he had something solid to rely upon at last. Instinctively, the boys laid their ears to the wall, hoping to hear more clearly what was taking place in the front of the cave. The sounds that came through were so dull that Tom decided that he could risk whispering to Bob. If they could not distinguish words

spoken in full voice on the other side of the wall of rock, it stood to reason that a whisper of theirs would not be heard at all.

"Bob, we've just *got* to find the entrance into the front of the cave," Tom whispered, putting his mouth close to the other's ear. "Work to the right, feeling every inch of the wall for an opening. As soon as you reach the corner, or if you find the passage, come back until you bump into me. I'll work to the left."

"All right," returned Bob, happy to be able to say even those two words after such a long period of enforced silence.

They parted and for a long moment the darkness was unruffled by the slightest sound.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!" The horrible clatter was deafening by comparison with the silence that had gone before.

Tom's mind worked quickly, but before he could fix anything except that the clamor came from Bob's direction, a sudden gleam lit up the scene. Unnerved by something he had done Bob had struck a match!

The brief glare discovered to the awed eyes of the boys a strange spectacle.

The chamber was a veritable arsenal! Hundreds of guns were stacked along the rocky wall, beside which Bob stood. He had blundered into a pile of them and it was their fall that had made the great disturbance.

The match flickered and went out, and darkness again closed in around them.

CHAPTER IX

THE RESCUE — AND A BATH

Tom's first thought, when he recovered from his sudden surprise, was not of the strange contents of the chamber, but of what effect the noise would have on the man in the outside cave. It seemed impossible that the disturbance had not been overheard by him — the reverberations still echoed in the darkness.

When everything was still again, both boys listened for some sound from outside that would give them an inkling of what to expect. To their great relief, the same dulled noise came to their ears, no louder or clearer than before.

"Great day!" ejaculated Tom, softly, yet in a speaking tone. It was an exclamation of relief, yet it made Bob jump.

"What — wha — " he stammered.

"It's all right," reassured Tom. "If that bedlam you raised a minute ago did not give us

away, our talking won't. It's a blessing to be able to do that in this sticky dark."

"But what do you make of this bunch of guns?" asked Bob Hazard. "My guess is that it is an outlaws' headquarters and probably that chap out there is the caretaker!"

"I don't think so," said Tom, who had picked up one of the guns. "I've got one here and from the feel of it, it is just like the musket Pop carried in the Civil War. Besides, it is covered with rust and the wooden stock is about crumbled to dust."

"Then this must have been a storeroom for the soldiers in that trench above."

"That's my reckoning. They must have been driven out before they could rescue their stores. But this isn't helping Ned any. We've still got to find the passage into the outer cave!"

"I'm afraid it's not going to be any cinch," said the Northern boy. "If we can't hear them any better than we have, and if the result of my clumsiness didn't alarm them, it's ten to one that during the years this chamber has been blocked off by a fall of rock!"

"You sure are a hopeful cuss," was all that

Tom replied. "Come on, let's make a try. How many matches have you? I left all mine at the canoe."

"About three, I think. Yes, that's all."

"We'll not waste 'em, then. We'll need a light probably when we come on the passage. Get busy, now, and don't miss a crevice!"

But their search seemed hopeless. The wall was smooth, without a suspicion of a crack. At last they gave it up in despair.

"There's nothing to it, but to go back, I reckon," announced Tom, his disappointment apparent in his voice. "It will mean going down the face of the cliff, but there is no other way possible."

"I guess you're right, old man," was Bob's disconsolate rejoinder. "We'd better hurry, too; it must be getting well along towards daylight."

Circling around the cavern, they found the passage through which they had come. Again Tom led the way, at first walking, and then on hands and knees. They had proceeded only a little way when Tom whispered tensely:

"We're going *down* hill!"

"I think you're right! This isn't the way we came or we'd be going *up*."

"Perhaps — perhaps we've stumbled on the way to the outside cave! Could that be possible?"

"Go on; we'll know in a moment!" was the excited response.

Again they moved forward. The passage twisted and turned but led steadily down. After traversing what seemed to him miles of rocky road, Bob turned a corner and almost fell over Tom's legs. The latter was lying at full length, motionless.

Then Bob felt Tom's hand catch his shoulder and urge him to come up alongside. When he squirmed into position, he realized what Tom's idea had been, for, right under their noses was an opening in the ground. Looking down, he knew that they were over the cave which formed Ned's prison.

As his eyes became more used to the soft light that filtered in from the cave's mouth — the moon had risen during their sojourn underground — he could distinguish the outlines of objects below him. Ned was sleeping on the

pallet right under them and, near the entrance, the man's long form was stretched as if keeping guard.

There was only one thing to do in the circumstances and both boys knew it. It would be a risky proposition to drop into the cave, wake Ned, hoist him into the tunnel and get back again, yet just that had to be done and done without waking the jailor. It was lucky that the latter was as far from the scene of activity as the confines of the cave would permit, and it was doubly lucky that the roof of the cave was lowest just where the opening was.

Both boys made the move at the same time, but Bob was the quicker. As he let himself through the hole, his face came close to his chum's.

"You're the strongest, Tom. You can pull us up better; that's why I'm going," he whispered, and Tom had to content himself with the passive role.

A second later Bob was hanging by his hands, his whole body suspended. "Now for it!" he thought, praying that he would land on his feet.

Letting go, he dropped only an inch or two

before his feet felt solid earth under them. So short was the drop that he made hardly any noise and he saw with relief that neither of the sleepers moved.

Catching his breath, Bob knelt by the motionless form of his friend and put his fingers over Ned's mouth to stifle any sudden outcry. Then, putting his lips to Ned's ear, he whispered, "Ned — Ned!"

The latter must have been sleeping lightly, for he opened his eyes immediately, and made no sound. Tom, looking down on the scene from above, murmured to himself: "Good old Ned, he's got *some* nerve!"

Ned quickly caught on to what was expected of him from Bob's gestures. Standing up on his one leg, he stretched up his arms, which Tom caught. With Bob pushing from below, it was an easy matter to hoist him into the tunnel. Then it was Bob's turn. With Ned and Tom both using themselves as derricks, the boy from the North was soon in the comparative safety of the passage. Silently they congratulated themselves that the rescue had been effected without waking the cave man. But nothing was

said aloud, as each was intent on getting out of the tunnel before they were discovered.

As long as the size of the tunnel forced them to crawl, Ned was all right. He could make progress as fast on two hands and *one* leg as the others could with a full complement of limbs, but when the passage grew bigger and walking was possible, if difficult, Ned was at a loss.

"Sorry, fellows," he panted, "but I had to leave my crutches. Old Whiskers took 'em away from me when we went to sleep — said he would rest easier if I hadn't 'em."

This was a facer, for it meant delay and it was imperative that they should win their way to the canoe before dawn broke.

"Go on and leave me," begged the boy. "I'll get out somehow."

"You're crazy," returned Tom. "Come on, Bob, we didn't rescue this hero just to lose him. You give him a hand until I find where this passage turns off. Give me one of your matches."

They had come to the chamber of the guns and felt that they could talk without danger. When the match flared, Ned exclaimed in won-

der and wanted to stop, but Bob caught him by the arm.

"We'll tell you all about it as soon as we're safe," he said as he hurried Ned along. "Got to save our breath right now!"

The same flash showed Tom the dividing point of the two passages. In the light it was easy to see how they had made their mistake. The tunnel which led from the trench to the chamber of the guns, emptied into a little anteroom, from which the other tunnel to the cave started. As these entrances were side by side, it had been sheer chance that they had entered the one they had on the way out.

When he was sure that he had found the right track, Tom came back and gave Bob a helping hand with Ned. Between them they made good time until it was necessary again to go on hands and knees. At last, however, the final lap of the journey was completed and the boys came out into the fresh night air just as the dawn flung up its first shaft of light.

Tom had warned his little party how dangerous it would be to talk after they had emerged from the tunnel into the trench. The sound of

their voices could easily carry over the brink of the cliff and down to the man who just now they so ardently wished to avoid. Therefore, in silence, the boys refreshed their lungs before making the dash to their canoe.

They had decided that Ned should be carried pick-a-back. Tom would start with him and then Bob would tackle the job the rest of the way.

Light comes fast once dawn breaks and the boys realized that they must be up and doing. They crawled along the trench until Tom decided that they were at the nearest point to the *Hazard*. Then, with Ned on his back, Tom led the way through the underbrush.

The canoe was a welcome sight. They piled in and pushed off, feeling at last some measure of safety. It had grown light enough to steer the canoe with some speed and as soon as they felt they were out of possible earshot, Ned broke the silence.

"It was certainly nervy of you two to come back and get me out of that hole! When I found I was caught I felt sure that you would go back home and bring help —"

"We couldn't leave you that long," expostulated Tom. "Tell us what happened to you — did he hurt you?"

"No, I'm all right," was the answer. "But my story will be tame compared to yours. I want to know how you found the tunnel and the guns. I was caught; that's about all that I've to tell — the rest can wait!"

Thus urged, Bob related all that had taken place since the attack on the cave had failed. When he got to the part where the guns were discovered, Ned agreed with Tom's theory that the rifles were undoubtedly relics of the Civil War.

"Some day we will have to come back and get them, but not until we have our friend safely locked up. I guess he's too much for us to handle alone!"

In view of their experience with him, the others agreed that reinforcements must be brought up if they wished to capture the man Ned had referred to as "Whiskers." Bob went on with his story and when he had finished, the crew of the *Hazard* found that they had reached the main stream.

Before Ned could get launched on his story, Tom put in a question.

"Say, Ned, don't you think Whiskers knows about the tunnel? The opening through which we pulled you was right in the middle of the roof."

Ned's answer was positive.

"I don't think so. I noticed the hole when the lantern was lit, but it seemed hardly more than a curious rock formation. I don't think anyone would suspect it was a tunnel-opening unless he happened to climb up there."

"That's good. Perhaps our friend won't suspect how we got you out then," he chuckled. "I'll bet he'll be mystified when he finds you gone and your crutches still there! The only explanation he'll think of is that you sprouted wings during the night. But come on; tell us what he did to you."

"To tell the truth, he didn't do much but laugh — that is, after he got his breath."

"Laugh?" echoed the other two boys. "Why did he laugh?"

"I don't know, but the whole thing seemed to strike him as being funny. He would try

to be harsh and growl at me, but every time he burst out laughing."

"That's what we heard when we were in the gun room," said Bob. Tom assented with a nod of his head and motioned Ned to go on.

"Well, fellows, it sort of made me mad, because we certainly put up a good scrap. I asked him point-blank what sort of crime he had committed and that made him burst out into another roar of laughter. Then he said that most folks wouldn't call it murder, but that it was bad enough. He sure puzzled me."

"I should think he would," said Tom. "But wasn't he afraid we'd bring someone to catch him in the morning?"

"He discussed that fully with me," was the answer. "The way he figured it was that you could not get back with help before late this morning and by that time he expected to be far away. The only part I did not care for was his plan for me."

"What was that?" asked Tom eagerly.

"I was to be tied up to a tree where you all would be sure to find me —"

Just then the exchange of experiences was

interrupted. So interested had the boys become in each other's experiences that little attention had been paid to paddling and hardly more than steerage way had been kept on their craft. Now a sound came to their ears, the sound of a paddle dipping regularly into the water.

"Great day in the morning! He's after us!" cried Ned. "Bend to it, fellows; we'll have to beat him!"

Tom and Bob dug their blades into the water with all their strength. The light craft seemed almost to fly out of the water under the impulse of strong young arms. Ned, who was seated in the waist of the canoe, acted as lookout.

"It's Whiskers, all right!" he exclaimed, as he saw the blunt nose of the dugout round the bend behind them. "Paddle for your lives!"

So intent were the boys on speed that they paid little heed to their direction. Once under way, they were gaining on their pursuer. Ned had opened his mouth to urge them on to greater efforts, when a sickening noise mingled with the rush of water, brought dismay to their hearts.

A moment later the boys were struggling in the cold water.

CHAPTER X

"WHISKERS"

The *Hazard* had tasted the first bit of hard luck that was to come her way. A jagged branch from a submerged log had torn a gaping hole in the canvas side of the canoe. So large a hole had it quickly become that she filled immediately and spilled her crew into the stream. The air chambers in the bow and stern kept her afloat although the gunwales were awash.

All the boys could swim, but the spring had not advanced sufficiently to make bathing an unalloyed joy. The sudden catastrophe and the cold water had jolted from their minds all thought of their being pursued by a desperate man. This fact came back quickly, however, when the dugout pushed its bow into the midst of the splashing boys. It was Whiskers, of course.

"Catch hold of the gunwale, each of you," the latter commanded in a gruff voice. All obeyed except Tom, who struck out lustily for shore. Without hurrying, Whiskers paddled after him and by threatening to use his paddle on Tom's head, obtained obedience.

While this was taking place, the almost submerged canoe had drifted to shore a little farther down stream. The man directed the dugout's course that way, towing the boys until a moment later it grounded on the bank.

Whiskers got out and watched with a satirical smile the wet and disgruntled boys emerge from the water. Then, quite solemnly, he produced a wicked looking automatic from his hip pocket and balanced it carelessly in his hand, as he talked.

"Well, young fellows, we meet again. I hope you are as glad to see me as I am to see *you!*" He paused a little and went on, "And this time I am expecting that you will not leave me so hurriedly, am I right?" In view of the instrument he held in his hand, the boys were unanimous in agreement. "That's good. Now, two of you empty the water out of your canoe and

bring it up here in the sun. Wait a moment; I brought your crutches — thought you might need 'em." Ned, who had been imitating a stork, took the implements gladly. "You," singling out Tom, "gather some wood for a fire. It would be discourteous if I should allow my late guests to remain wet. Not *too* far," he cautioned, as Tom started hurriedly in the general direction of home. "There's plenty of wood quite close!"

His directions were carried out to the accompaniment of a steady stream of banter. When the fire was burning briskly, he ordered them to get as close to it as they could without burning to a crisp.

"While you are drying out, my lads, we can have a heart to heart talk."

"What the dickens are you going to do with us, Whiskers?" burst out Tom, unable to restrain himself longer.

"Whiskers, is it? Whiskers, indeed!" burst out the man with a roar of mirth. "Well, that name will do as well as another." His laugh died to a smile. "But I've not answered your question. What am I going to do with you? It

all depends on what is the outcome of our little talk. Perhaps one thing and perhaps another."

The boys' spirits began to rise under the influence of Whisker's badinage and the warmth of the fire. Before any of them spoke, however, the man had begun again.

"This is an important question. Answer it carefully. Why did you attack me last night?"

It was Bob who answered.

"Why, why, when we stumbled on the cave we felt sure that you were an escaped criminal and — and —"

"And you thought you'd capture me and claim the reward? Was that it?"

"Yes — yes, sir," was the stammered reply. Perhaps it was something in the man's tone of voice that made them feel that their object had not been a worthy one.

"Doesn't it strike you that possibly even an escaped criminal might be innocent? And even if he wasn't, that a jail is a pretty poor place for a man? You don't like to keep an animal caged, do you? I thought not."

Whiskers had seen by the boys' faces that he had hit the right note. They squirmed and

realized that somehow their escaped criminal had put them in the wrong. Tom blurted out his feeling.

"I see what you mean. But won't you tell us your story? If we only knew that you were innocent, it would help a lot!"

"You mean that if you were sure that I was straight you would not go back home and tell the authorities my whereabouts?" A peculiar smile played about the man's mouth as he spoke.

"You said it! That's just what we mean!" the boys cried.

"You seem to forget," said Whiskers dryly, "that it is my privilege to say whether you are ever to go home again." He seemed to debate with himself a moment. Then he continued. "But I'm inclined to take a chance with you fellows and I am not even going to explain whether I'm guilty or innocent. I'm going to take a chance that you chaps are good sports — that you will give me the benefit of the doubt. Am I right?"

Surely, in spite of the villainous growth of beard that almost covered his face, this man did not look as the boys had imagined a criminal

should. There was something in the clearness of the eyes that gleamed at them, something in the whole-hearted exuberance of his laugh, that disarmed them. They looked from one to the other and then Bob spoke.

"I'm willing to trust you and I think the fellows are, too. I don't believe you ever did what you are accused of."

Whiskers laughed again.

"Thank you for those cheering words, my son. Some day I will tell you all, but the time is not ripe. And when I tell you, perhaps you will explain how my captive broke jail. I'll be interested to know, for it was a neat job!" The boys were thrilled. It was almost as if they were conspirators.

"We'll tell you how he did it if you'll explain to us right now what you're doing out here in the swamp," offered Tom, seeing a possible chance to trade secrets.

'You will, will you?" was the answer he got. "That's good of you. But somehow I don't figure it as an even bargain. I might do a little Sherlock Holmesing around the cave in my leisure moments and thereby find out how

my guest left so suddenly without bidding me good-bye. It's questionable whether you can find out as much about me. No, I fear I shall have to decline the offer and hold you to your decision — not to give me away. That holds good, doesn't it?"

Seeing the futility of getting any further information, the boys agreed.

"But you will let us know the mystery as soon as you can?" insisted Ned. "Somebody might come along any time and ask us questions we couldn't answer. You've thought of that?"

"Sure. But I rather think you won't be bothered just now at any rate. Perhaps sooner than you think I'll come down the river and confess all my sins. By the way, where will I find you if I should come?"

"Almost every afternoon we're at the Island where the South Anna and Little River forks."

"What are you doing there? Building a cabin?"

"Growing a crop of corn."

"There are certainly a lot of ways to spend a summer vacation. But a crop of corn! That sounds like *work!*"

"It is. But this is a special crop. We are out to beat a record and perhaps win a prize. Come down and see our farm. Nobody comes down there except us."

"All right, I may. Watch out for me, for I'll probably come when you least expect me."

The trio were somehow cheered by Whiskers' promise to visit them. Perhaps it was because they felt instinctively that he would not jeer at their efforts but would probably sympathize. Before they had a chance to reply, Whiskers spoke briskly:

"Well, now that part is settled, we'd better see about getting you chaps home. Nearly dry?"

They felt themselves all over and although there were damp spots here and there, they announced themselves as ready for the next thing on the program.

"I guess we'd better see what can be done to your canoe," was Whisker's suggestion. He went over and looked at the tear carefully. "It's not as bad as it might be. I think we can fix it up in a jiffy!"

While he tinkered with the tear, he sent Bob

to cut a piece of bark from a birch tree. The boys watched him, fascinated as he patched the rent with the bark and sewed it with string. To complete the job, he gathered some rosin sap from the near-by pines and smeared the edges of the patch.

"That ought to do until you get to the fork of the river. It's not very pretty, but it will hold you out of the water, if you don't stick your foot through the weak spot. You may have to bail a little, too —"

If there is one thing which will force admiration from a boy, it is the ability to do an emergency job well. Whiskers had done what had seemed to them impossible. They felt that a man as skilled in woodcraft as was this one, could not possibly have done anything wrong.

When the canoe was again launched, only a few drops of water made their way inside. As they started to paddle off, Whiskers called:

"Remember, I'm trusting you!"

When they had rounded the next bend, Tom, who was paddling now, turned and addressed his companions:

"Can you beat that for an adventure?"

CHAPTER XI

ON THE TRAIL

When school closed at last, there was only one drawback to Ned's and Bob's enjoyment at being free from morning until night: Tom was not as free as themselves.

Many a plan had to be given up because Tom was necessary to its success, and things they did do often lacked completeness because their chum was absent.

"I don't think Big Chris ought to work him so hard!" exploded Bob one day. "Why doesn't he sneak away?"

"Well, he *promised* he'd work if he could keep on at school," said Ned. "And old Tom won't play hookey from a promise, you know that as well as I do."

"I guess you're right," grumbled the Northern boy, "but all the same I wish he could come along with us oftener. There ought to be a limit, but Big Chris never lets up!"

"Wait a minute, wait just a minute!" Ned cried. "I think I've got a plan — "

"To get Tom off?"

"Yes. What do you think of this? Let's go down to Big Chris and offer to help Tom in the mornings if he can get off in the afternoons. Chris Wickham's a hard man, but he prides himself on being fair. He ought to be willing."

"Fine idea!" was the enthusiastic answer. "Come on; let's go down and see how it works."

It worked and the boys worked in consequence. But, as they were all together, the hard tasks Tom's father set them to do seemed easy. They plowed, hoed, repaired fence; in fact, did all the many things necessary to keep a farm running. However, when the three had accomplished what the old man felt that Tom should have done alone, he would set them free for the rest of the day.

Tom was the only one who was seriously upset by this arrangement. He felt that the others were giving up too much for him — that it was not fair to them. However, seeing that they were determined, he was forced to give in.

Tom's father had not needed his help much

before school closed, or, if he had, did not say so, for almost every afternoon Tom had been free to work with his chums on Bear Island without the necessity of their ransoming him.

A day or so after the unsuccessful raid on the cave, Tom remembered that Mr. Elwood had advised going lightly over the field with a harrow about four days after the seed was planted.

"We'd better do it, fellows," he decided, "although we are a little late. Mr. Elwood says doing this will kill the quick growing weeds and also let air get to the seed, which will help it to germinate."

When this was done, the boys had waited anxiously for the first sign of the seed's sprouting.

It was a great moment when they saw the first green shoot peeping out of the ground, for it marked the first really tangible sign of what was to come. Somehow the ever recurring miracle of growing things is always surprising. One puts a seed in the ground, hoping, believing it will be fertile and grow; one waits during the time it is underground with growing fear

and suspicion; but it is not until the plant breaks from its earthy prison into the sunlight that one is sure that nature again has triumphed.

The first evidence of their industry was rapidly followed by others until there were little spots of green all over the field. When the shoots averaged three inches in height, Tom announced, "We'll start hoeing corn to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" echoed Bob, "Why, we will bury these little plants if we disturb the ground around them."

"Not so's you could notice it," returned the farmer's boy. "And anyway the hoeing's not meant to bury the plants in earth, but to let moisture and air to their roots. The secret of a big corn crop is to get the proper proportion of moisture and air into the soil."

"Where'd you get the long words, Tom?" asked Ned with a smile. "Mighty highbrow line of talk — "

"It was marked in a book Mr. Elwood sent down," Tom flashed back. "If you'd study those books more yourself, you wouldn't have to be told — "

"All right, all right, old man. Tell us how to get the air and moisture into the soil."

This mollified Tom, so he went on —

"It's by cultivation, and what that means is a constant stirring up of the soil around the growing stalks. The latest method and the most successful, so the book says, is shallow cultivation; that is, only breaking the surface to a depth of two inches."

"But isn't there a way to do this by a machine?" asked Bob. "It seems to me that there's some sort of apparatus in Brother Eddy's barn that I've heard called a cultivator."

"There is," Ned put in, "but it would have to be drawn by a quieter nag than Pony. He'd walk all over our young corn. I see what Tom's driving at — it's up to us and our trusty hoes. Huh, Tom?"

"That's it. Let's get started."

Next morning, as they made their way through the fresh early air towards the Island, Bob Hazard took up the conversation where it had dropped.

"Do we do this often, Tom?"

"The book says eight or ten times during

the crop. At that rate I expect we'll be at it all summer — "

"As soon as we finish one cultivation, we'll have to start all over again?"

"'Fraid so, but I reckon when the stalks are bigger we can get the cultivator and team from Brother Eddy. That will help some."

"You bet. Well, fellows, let's get to work."

They started across the field in the same direction that they had plowed the field, loosening the earth and drawing it towards the little plants, taking care, however, not to bring the earth too close. When all the rows had been done, Tom started them working across the field at right angles to the paths they had just taken.

"I see now why we had to be so careful about measurements before planting," exclaimed Bob. "If we hadn't, the hills would have been irregular and we couldn't have cross cultivated like this. Another victory for 'book farming.'"

When the job was done, their field was a sight good to see. The squares made by their cultivation were regular and exact — it looked neat and efficient. Also, for the first time, the "hills" had some resemblance to their name.

Before, the spot where the seed was planted was a "hill," but until this cultivation these spots had been as level as the surrounding field.

Tom let his chums survey their handiwork for several satisfying moments. Then he sprang a surprise on them.

"Feel strong, fellows?" he asked. "Ready for some fun to-morrow?"

"Yes, sure," returned Bob. "What's up?" Ned was not so anxious, so he kept still, waiting for what would come. From Tom's tone he suspected that the "fun" might turn out to be something quite different.

"That's good," Tom said, "because we'll have lots of fun down on the Island. Get your hoes —"

"What?" wailed Bob. "More hoe work? We've just been over the field."

Ned laughed. "I knew you had something up your sleeve, old boy. You didn't fool me!"

"I didn't try to," chuckled Tom. "All I was going to say was, get your hoes sharpened, for as soon as these shoots grow to from eight to ten inches high, we must start cultivating it again. All we have to do right now is to thin

the field out. Only the strongest plants should be allowed to go on growing."

"How soon will they be that high?" inquired Bob, much relieved to know that he wasn't expected to start the tiresome hoeing again immediately.

"It won't be long, don't worry about that. But thinning is not so all-fired easy. Don't think you've got any cinch job for to-morrow."

And so it proved.

When three o'clock came the next afternoon, Bob was glad to hear Ned yell:

"Something tells me I'd like a swim!"

"Last one in's a rotten egg!" yelled Bob, racing for the bank of the river, tearing off his clothes as he ran.

The others followed and with hardly an instant's separation between them, three mighty splashes disturbed the slow-flowing old river.

"Great day, but it's good!" spluttered Ned.

"Better'n that swim we took up river when Whiskers —" Bob laughed.

"You bet!" Tom interrupted. "That *was* cold — but Whiskers warmed us up!"

"Mighty decent of him to dry us and then

let us go after the way we'd treated him, *I* think," was Bob's comment.

"Me too," confirmed Ned. "And then to bring along my crutches! But, Tom, do you think he's still there in the cave?"

They pulled themselves up out of the water and sat on the clay bank, letting the warm sun dry them. At length Tom answered:

"I reckon so. Don't see any reason why not. But — but I wish he'd come down and tell us things are all right, as he said he would."

"Don't you think they are all right?"

"Sure, I trust him. We all do or we wouldn't have kept our mouths shut as we have. But all the same I'd sure like to see him."

After a little more idle speculation, thoroughly dried and feeling much refreshed, they resumed their work in the field. The greater part of the next afternoon was also used up in the same way, but at the end they had the satisfaction of knowing that the strongest plants that had sprung from each hill had been given every chance to get all the nourishment possible from the ground, without having to share it with weaker brothers.

It had meant stooping over and pulling up the weaker plants by hand. Great care had to be taken in order that the young plants should come out roots and all, or at least that the stalk be broken *under* ground, as it would grow again if any of the stalk was exposed to the air.

After this operation there was nothing more to do until Tom felt it wise to cultivate again. This happened just before school closed. Again in June, the rows had to be gone over once more.

Leaving Bob and Ned at the fork of the road which led to the Big House the night the third cultivation was finished, Tom trudged his way home through the gathering dusk. He was thinking of what a bully summer it had been so far, of the adventures and sport that it had held. To the hard work the summer had brought, he gave hardly any thought, as even that had become part of living and was therefore fun.

When he reached the house his sharp ears told him that a vehicle, a buggy from the sound, was going down the river road. Probably someone had stopped at the house. Going into

the kitchen, he found that his mother had saved him a bite of supper — it was now far beyond the time of the evening meal. While he was munching the food, he heard his name called. It was his father.

"Coming, sir," Tom managed to call, his mouth full.

"Late for yer vittles again!" was the way he was greeted. "Reckon it's that hundred-bushel crop that's kept you? Well, it's my reckonin' sho', that ye passel o' boys'll have to stay up all night *every* night to make sich a crop! Haw — haw!" He roared at what he felt was a very funny joke.

In like cases Tom had learned that the best course by far was to keep still and wait what was coming. When at last the storm subsided, Big Chris spoke.

"When you been traipsin' around in that *can*-oo, have you located any strange white trash roamin' the woods?"

This question in its unexpectedness almost stunned the boy. His body stiffened and he looked at his father, feeling as he did so that his expression must be giving away his knowl-

edge of Whiskers. A million thoughts rushed through his brain in an instant. At last one came on which he seized. The buggy he had heard was the one that had brought the news! Someone was on Whiskers' trail and had spread the alarm. Trying to control his voice, he answered:

"A stranger, Pop? In this neighborhood? Why would anyone come around here?" He hoped with this flood of questions to divert his father from demanding a direct reply. Tom did not want to lie, and a wave of relief passed over him when his father's next words showed that he had succeeded.

"'Tain't much of a section to attract folks, that's a fact, but Jake Beasley, the sheriff, has just been here an' he allows that a man done escaped from the pen'tentiary an' last seen of him was somewheres here in Hanover County. If he was smart enough to escape, I reckon he's spry enough to keep out o' sight o' you boys." Big Chris hesitated a moment and continued: "But I'd like to get my hands on him — 'twould be worth nigh onto five hundred dollars to the feller what caught him. A mighty

nice li'l' piece o' land could be had for that," he finished meditatively.

Tom's heart jumped as he contrived to form a question. Sure as he was that Whiskers was the man on whose head the price was set, he wanted all the information he could get. A plan had half formed itself in his brain as his father talked; and to decide if he should carry it out he needed to know all that was available.

"What did the — the man do, Pop?" was what he said.

"Stole a heap o' money from a bank in Roanoke, Jake said. Name was Simpson. The way of the transgressor is hard — "

But Tom was not listening. His relief was great to find that Whiskers was not accused of murder. Stealing was bad enough, but the boy could find more excuses for it. Besides, he did not believe that Whiskers was guilty, anyway.

Awaking from his reverie, he heard his father finish.

"And, son, if you see anyone actin' suspicious-like, you make tracks comin' to tell me 'bout it. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," answered Tom, taking up a bulle-

tin of the Agriculture Department and pretending to read, although his mind was far from the printed page. As soon as he felt it safe, he said good night and went up to his room.

CHAPTER XII

TOM'S ERRAND

Once in his room Tom slipped off his shoes, blew out the lamp and lay down on his bed fully dressed.

The plan that had occurred to him downstairs met his full approval when he heard of what Whiskers was accused, and he determined to carry it out.

He would go and warn Whiskers of his danger.

Tom knew that if it was to be done at all, it must be done at once. In fact, it must be done that very night, for on the morrow he would be in his father's sight all day, it being Sunday. Big Chris was a devout man and belonged to a church which observed Sunday minutely. There would be Sunday school early in the day, then preaching. Luncheon would be eaten in the churchyard and again the minister would hold

forth during the whole of the hot afternoon. And Big Chris would see to it that his son should not miss a word. No, it had to be done that night, and although the thought of the journey through the dark held its terrors, even for this country boy, Tom knew he would not hesitate a moment when the time came.

Alert, he lay in the dark, waiting for some sound to tell him his father had gone to bed. It was not a long vigil, for Big Chris tired early of spelling out the news in his paper.

As soon as all was quiet, the boy crept softly to his open window. Tying the laces together, he slung his shoes around his neck and crawled out. Hanging by his hands, with his stockinged feet he sought a foothold on the warped shutter of the window belonging to the room below. It was a dangerous moment, but he had practiced the stunt often. Letting go his hands, he turned quickly and half jumped, half fell onto a branch of a great locust tree that pushed its friendly arms towards the house. A little shaken and breathless, he perched himself near the tree trunk for a brief rest.

A moment later he was on the ground, and

surrounding him were his two rabbit hounds.

"Down, Rush!" he commanded softly. "Not this time, Minnie!"

Whimpering a little, the well-trained animals slunk back under the house, their expectations of a coon hunt foiled.

Tom sped through the gloom, feeling his way by intuition rather than sight. The sky was cloudy; not a star could penetrate the fleecy blanket, and the moon was on the other side of the world.

Bear Island reached, he skirted the young corn until he came to the point where the canoe was hauled up on the bank. As he struggled to get it into the water, he was sorry that his chums were not with him, but comforted himself with the knowledge that it would have taken far too much of the short time at his disposal to summon them. He must be back in his room before dawn, and every moment counted.

Until he got well started on his paddling Tom had been too excited and full of his determination to get to Whiskers to be conscious of the weird journey on which he had embarked.

Now the dark, the silence of the forest night, punctuated here and there by queer sounds from all the myriad animals, penetrated his absorption.

It *was* scary. But on he went. It is not the person who does not know fear who is brave, but the one who is terrified to the bottom of his heart and still goes on.

Many of the noises that came to the boy's ears were familiar and could be classified, but those he did not know — at each repetition a little hammer pounded at his heart.

But soon his attention was diverted from his own feelings. Always before two of the boys had paddled when bucking the current of the river. Now he was alone and what his strength could accomplish was not sufficient. A landmark that he chanced to remember showed him that he had made but little headway against the stream for the time he'd been paddling. Something must be done.

If navigation was impossible, the only thing left was to hoof it. Having decided, Tom lost no time in carrying out his determination. Swinging the bow of the canoe to the bank,

he climbed out, made her fast, and struck out up the bank along the river. He was reasonably sure that he would be able to locate the *Hazard* again, and he knew that the point where he had left her was close to the landmark he had fixed in his mind.

The going was rough. His path lay as close to the stream as possible, as it was his only guide. Fearing he might lose his way completely, he dared not take advantage of what in daylight would have been obvious short-cuts.

The banks of a river subject to periodical overflows are hardly to be compared with tow-paths. Instead they are uneven, cluttered with driftwood, and likely to be marshy. Stumbling, climbing, slipping, Tom made what speed he could.

Once his foothold gave way and he was precipitated into the river, only to come out little the worse for his drenching. The wet clothes impeded him, however, and made the going even slower.

When at last he felt that his powers of endurance were about exhausted, a streak of luck came his way. Tom's plan had been to

follow the South Anna to the fork where the stream on which the cave was situated branched off, although he knew that it meant at least a mile or two more of journeying. This was made unnecessary by the chance sight of light which flared up for an instant over the trees.

Tom marked the spot and directed his footsteps that way, realizing that in all probability it was Whiskers' camp fire, flickering before it went out.

Before he reached his goal, however, there was one more obstacle to overcome. The boy had gone only a few hundred feet in the new direction before his feet met swampy ground. Pushing ahead, he found it growing worse, instead of better. Thoughts of quicksand came to him as he plowed through the swamp, sometimes up to his waist in the muddy water.

The swamp was not wide at this point, but to the weary lad its crossing was more of a task than all that had gone before. "Get a wiggle on!" he said to himself aloud. "Buck up, you're almost there!"

It was a relief to get his feet on solid land again and in spite of a desire to sit down and

get his breath, he pushed on and made his way around the cliff up to the cave.

Everything was peaceful. The fire was a mass of embers and shed just enough light to show the dugout in its accustomed place, half in, half out, of the water. From the mouth of the cave came heavy breathing — so heavy that it was perilously close to a snore.

"Whiskers!" called Tom. "Whiskers!"

An alarmed voice sounded from the cave's depth:

"Hey? What? Who is it?"

A moment later, upon being reassured that it was a friend, out Whiskers came, in one hand his automatic, ready for action in case it should be a trap, an electric torch in the other.

"It's you again, is it?" he said when the light had confirmed what he'd heard. "Back again — and what's the game this time? Repented of your trust? Got a bunch of young wildcats ready to spring on me when I'm quiet?"

"No, sir," returned Tom. "I just came to tell you that *they* are on your trail and know you are somewheres about here!"

"The dickens *they* are and do!" exclaimed the man. Then, taking another look at Tom, he saw the bedraggled condition in which the boy was. "Here, old man, come over to the fire and tell me about it."

Whiskers threw on an armful of pine knots, which, being full of resin, immediately burned up brightly.

"And — and you came all the way here to warn me of something?" asked the bearded man slowly.

"Yes."

"So that I could run for it?"

"Yes."

For a long moment Whiskers was silent. Then he came around the fire and held out his hand.

"Thanks," he said simply. "Now tell me all about it."

Tom told what his father had said, the offense, the reward, everything, finishing with: "So I came to tell you."

From the boy's clothing the man was able to judge what difficulties Tom had overcome in getting there.

"And do you still think I'm innocent?"

"I don't *know*," retorted Tom, wearily. "I just trust you somehow."

"You have honored me more than you know," said Whiskers very gravely and seriously. "And I can't make believe any longer. I'm going to confess to you!"

"No, don't!" said Tom quickly. "I couldn't stand it if you were guilty!"

"But I'm not!" almost shouted Whiskers in his honest voice. "I'm hiding, but not from the police."

Tom was astounded.

"Why — why did you let us think so, then?" he demanded.

"To pay you chaps back. You assumed that I was a fugitive from justice and it seemed rather to spoil the sport if I declined to be *it*. Besides, it was an experiment to find out whether I was the sort of fellow to be trusted —"

"Then — who *are* you?" insisted Tom.

"I'm *not* the man the sheriff is hunting," returned the other, "and that's about all I'm going to tell you right now. I'll have to explain

it all some other time. But don't worry any more about my being a criminal! I must not be seen by anyone but you boys, that's all."

"Just as you want, sir!" Tom said. "But you will come down to the fork soon and see how our corn is coming along?"

"Sure, I'll be glad to," said Whiskers.

They talked a little more but at last Tom got up stiffly.

"I reckon I'd better start back," he said. "I've got to get into the house before daylight."

"You've got to get back?" exclaimed Whiskers. "You can't, old man —"

"Can't help it. Better start," said Tom, although his knees quaked a little at the thought of the return journey. He moved away from the ring of the fire. A moment later Whiskers had him by the arm.

"If you go, I'll take you," he insisted. "I'll take you in the dugout. You've come through all that to warn me — do you think I'd let you try to hoof it back again alone? Not so's you could notice it! You did a big thing to-night, and I want you to know I'm properly appreciative!"

A little later the clouds passed away to show the moon, almost round, nailed to the heavens. By its light a bearded man paddled a canoe in which a boy lay sleeping.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LEVEE

"Bully for you!" was Bob Hazard's comment when Tom related his adventure to them before church the next morning.

"I'm sure enough glad that Whiskers is on the level," was Ned's remark.

And, indeed, this was the first thought of all the boys. Although the personality of the man had been sufficiently attractive to win their unquestioning trust, it was good to know that he had not hypnotized them, had not fooled them. That the man had really made a deep impression was shown by the fact that none of the boys questioned his unsupported statement as to his innocence of any real crime.

"But the thing I can't understand is why he wouldn't tell you who he was," said Bob. "If there was nothing to hide, why should he be so mysterious?"

"I don't know. It *is* funny!"

"I think I know!" exclaimed Ned, who was the most romantic of the trio. "He's in love and his lady has sent him to the wilderness to test him, like some of Sir Walter Scott's stories."

"You're crazy," laughed Tom. "He's got too much sense for that."

"Perhaps, but still it's funny."

"Don't let's bother about it," concluded Tom. "He promised to tell the whole story when the time was ripe. I vote we wait until then. What worries me now is that the *Hazard* is somewhere on the other side of the river. I was asleep in the dugout when we passed by it coming back."

"I'll swim over there to-morrow and get it," promised Bob. "It's all right; no one will bother with it. Did you get back into the house without being caught, Tom?"

The talk drifted aimlessly after that until the bell called them into church.

As things turned out, Bob Hazard was saved the trouble of swimming the river to retrieve the canoe, for the next day, as the boys were cul-

tivating with hoes, they heard a shout from the river bank.

It was Whiskers.

When they got to him they found that he had the *Hazard* towing behind the dugout.

"Saw it hanging to the bank and thought you chaps would like to have it," was his remark as he stepped ashore.

Bob was loudest in his thanks, because, while the swim across the river was nothing, the idea of the jaunt up the river bank with no clothes to protect him from the briers had not filled him with any great enthusiasm.

Whiskers had been looking at the field of young corn as the boys chattered.

"Looks mighty healthy to me," he said. "You fellows do it all?"

"Uh-huh," Tom grunted to hide the pride he felt arising from the man's praise.

"Let's look it over," the latter suggested, striding off as he spoke. "I know a little something about farming and I might give you a pointer or so."

They circled the field, Whiskers in front, the others trailing behind. The man's eyes took in

everything. When they came back to their starting place, Tom spoke inquiringly:

"Well?"

"That's what I get for boasting!" cried Whiskers, laughing. "I've got to confess that I can't tell *you* chaps anything about farming, and from what I've just seen of your results you could tell me lots."

"Then you really think we're on the right track? That there is a chance for us to win out?" put in Ned, eagerly.

"You bet I do!" was the hearty assurance. "As far as the farming methods are concerned, I'm sure you are right. There is only one thing that worries me."

"What is it?" chorused the boys.

"Isn't this mighty low ground? How about a freshet coming along and drowning your crop?"

The hideous ever-present apprehension of the possibility of this disaster had been stilled somewhat by the continued good behavior of the river. Yet, at Whiskers' words, the fear came back to each boy and they knew that they had been fooling themselves with only a fancied

security. It was Bob Hazard who finally answered.

"Yes," he said, slowly, "it is low, and a flood, even a little one, would ruin us —"

"But it's an even chance no overflow will come," broke in Ned. "The spring freshets are over and for many years there's been no trouble during the summer."

"You *are* a plucky bunch, all right," said Whiskers admiringly. "I sure hope you'll win out. But wait a moment; isn't this bank we're sitting on now high enough? It looks so to me."

"*This* part's all right," Tom explained. "Except in the very worst cases, it's always out of water. It's the south end which is most dangerous. That part down there, behind the clump of scrub pine." He indicated the direction with a wave of his hand.

Almost before Tom had finished his sentence, Whiskers was off in that direction. So surprised were the lads at this sudden move that they stood as if their feet were rooted to the ground.

"Come on," called Whiskers over his shoul-

der. "Let's examine the weak spot in the defenses."

When they reached the edge of the river the man was already there.

"You're right," he announced, after he had looked the place over. "This is the weak link in the chain. The river bank must be six feet lower here than anywheres else and this level is about the same as in the middle of your field. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," was the boys' sober reply.

"It's like Holland or the Mississippi Valley," said Whiskers almost to himself. "The fertile land is lower than the water level." As if awakening from a reverie, he turned to the boys. "Why don't you use your spare time and build a levee here?"

"I reckon because — because we never thought of it," stammered Ned.

"We'll do it now, then," was Tom's quick decision. In a flash he had seen the importance and worth of the idea and had acted.

"It will be good insurance," commented the man. "I believe that with good luck — and such a levee as will make this part of the

bank as high as the rest — you ought to be able to resist a medium freshet at least."

"But how ought it to be built?" Bob wanted to know. "There aren't many stones near."

"Don't need 'em, son," said Whiskers, becoming enthusiastic about the execution of his own idea. "The thing to do is to pile up along this bank as much loose material as possible. Then it should be covered with dirt. All your spare time can be used in shoveling. There's a good thing to begin with now. Come on; lend a hand!"

What he saw was a scarred old log which had been left as a memento by the last overflow. Under the combined efforts of the boys and himself it was rolled until it lay lengthwise to the river. Next a stump claimed Whiskers' attention — soon it joined the log to make the foundation of the Bear Island levee. A few stones, the half-rotted hulk of a flat-bottomed punt, anything and everything movable was added to the pile.

"Tell me!" exploded Bob during a moment's lull in the work. "There's more to making a crop of corn than in just watching it grow."

The lengthening shadows told that the day was growing old. When they quit, a respectable start had been made on the breakwater. Whiskers had worked with a will, keeping the boys laughing with his remarks.

"This has been fun," he asserted as the dugout was cast loose. "I want to see a lot more progress the next time I come down, though."

"You will," they promised him. "And it was sure fine of you to help us."

"Don't mention it," laughed Whiskers, as he started to paddle away. "Just don't forget me when you need a farm hand again."

CHAPTER XIV

THE FUTURE

It was Bob Hazard who took the lead in the building of the levee. The other two meekly took his orders after they found that Bob, through some natural ability, always seemed to know the easiest and most practical methods of construction. For him, building was a gift, as to some people is given the ability to play the piano without instruction. Ned summed it up one day when, after Bob had devised a system of leverage to move a great boulder, the boys sat down to rest.

"Got to hand it to you, Bob. You build dams 'by ear,' just as Uncle Eddy plays the accordion. What you going to be — an engineer?"

"Yes," answered the Northern boy, "I am. It's going to be tough on Dad, who wants me to be a lawyer and succeed to his practice, but

I guess he'd rather I'd be a good engineer than a hack lawyer. And I'd never make an indoor man. I want to live outdoors and make things!" His voice rang with determination.

"I reckon you'll be an engineer, then," commented Tom Wickham. "If you feel that way about it, nothing will stop you."

"What do you figure on doing?" returned Bob, anxious to turn the talking away from himself.

"Farm," Tom answered promptly. "But not in the shiftless way everybody around here does. I'm going to learn how first — that is, if we make the hundred-bushel crop."

"Don't fret about *that,*" Ned put in. "Even if we don't, Big Chris surely won't hold to his threat of not letting you go to school."

"You don't know Pop, and I do," was the rueful answer. "Unless we make that crop — " He sighed expressively. "But what about you, Ned, old man? Since this seems to be an 'experience meeting,' we'd better hear your ambition, too, and make it unanimous. What do you want to do?"

Tom did not hesitate a moment in putting his

question to Ned. It was a proof of the latter's indomitable spirit that neither in word nor act did his two companions ever refer to his crippled condition. Ned had so often proved that wherever they went and whatever they did he was right with them, that they did not even think of trying to shelter him or make his portion of the task lighter. Any sympathy would have meant a serious break in their comradeship, for Ned could stand pain but not pity. Only he himself was allowed to speak of his loss.

"I don't just rightly know, fellows," was his answer, after some deliberation. "Uncle Eddy is set on my going to Charlottesville and letting his beloved Alma Mater make a teacher of me. I've got two things against this plan; one is that it would be pretty hard pinching for Uncle Eddy to afford it, and t'other is that I'm not just exactly in love with books! Except adventure stories, I mean."

Tom and Bob waited until their friend went on again. After a moment Ned spoke.

"I suppose teaching would be the best thing for me — but, fellows, even with one leg absent, I *want* an outdoor life, too, and — and I want

some real adventure — and to see the world."

"Of course, you do," chimed in Bob.

"You'll have it, too," Tom asserted.

"I've thought and figured and reckoned —" He broke off suddenly and started on a new line of thought: "You remember that telegraph system we rigged up between the house and the barn? Yes? Well, fellows, I think that's going to be the answer."

Tom shook his head. "There isn't much in railroading any more. It's too easy; you sit in an office all day and the dispatcher does it all. Besides, how'd you see the world then?"

"I don't mean railroading. Wireless!"

This *was* an idea. The other two boys saw its possibilities in an instant. But Ned was going on.

"I got it when I read about Jack Binns of the *Republic*. That *was* an adventure! And I don't see that it would have made any difference if he had had a cork leg — might even have been a help if he had had to swim for it," Ned laughed, although there was a catch in his voice. The others joined in, but it was not a hearty effort. "I've been practicing on the instru-

ment and I can send like a streak — it's the receiving that bothers me, as there is no one to send to me, since we gave up fooling with it."

"I'll get right in practice, Ned," promised Bob, "and we'll work with it every night. I think it's a fine stunt. We might even rig up a wireless station of our own."

"Haven't we got enough stuff to do already?" inquired Tom, smiling. "Our crop and the levee?"

"Sure we have," returned Ned; "but rainy days —"

"I'll help you then," agreed Tom. "I just didn't want you to forget the big job we've tackled. Well, now that our futures are all planned, supposin' we go to work on that big stump. How shall we tackle it, Bob, since you are the engineer of this bunch?"

The levee grew under their hands and the long summer days passed quickly. Nature did the trick for the corn, which was now breast-high. Frequent shallow cultivations had been made in accordance with Mr. Elwood's instructions. That had all been done with hoes, too, as just when they needed it they found they

could not hire Brother Eddy's cultivator. Hardly had one hoeing been completed before Tom would command their starting at the beginning and doing it all over again. But the results warranted all the hard work, they had to admit, for the field was an inspiring sight. Not a weed, and the soil was loose and moist, thanks to light rains at just the right times. Everything had conspired to help the corn; the weather had been perfect. It was extraordinary how evenly the stalks had grown — almost every plant was equal to its neighbor; not as in most fields, where one portion would be strong and hardy and another weak and straggly, due, the boys were convinced, to bad selection of seed corn and unequal fertilizing.

One day Big Chris made them another visit, probably impelled by curiosity and a desire to laugh again at what he felt sure was a foolish experiment. The young planters happened to be in a bunch when he strode up.

"Hello, Pop," Tom greeted him; "what do you think of our crop?"

The big man became red in the face as he looked out over the field. His real desire to

be just was having an awful battle with his preconceived decision that the boys would surely fail.

"Huh? What d'ye think I reckon 'bout it? Fair lookin' field — fair lookin,' I'll say that for ye, but t'ain't a-goin' to do ye no good, no-how, fur they ain't no field can make a hundred bushel to the acre! *I* ain't never done it!" as if that ended the argument.

"But other folks have," asserted Tom.

"Did ye ever see 'em? Did ye ever see the crops?" demanded Chris, heatedly.

"No, but I've read about them — "

"Read 'bout 'em!" echoed Tom's father in exasperation. "And what does that prove? Books! I s'pose if somebody put in a book that if you boil your seed corn you could raise batter-bread, you'd do it," he ridiculed.

"You plant your crops by the almanac," Tom ventured to say.

"I plant 'em by the season — and common sense," he answered shortly.

There was silence for a moment and then with a last snort, Big Chris stamped away, muttering under his breath.

"Whew! A lot of encouragement we're getting, aren't we?" asked Bob of the surrounding atmosphere.

"Well," said Ned, "I think the best encouragement we could have is the sight of that crop growing right under our noses. Since our first stalk came up I've watched every other patch in the neighborhood — I'll bet both of you have, too — and there isn't one that's as good looking as ours right now!"

"That's so," Tom said earnestly, "but it's up to the seed corn whether our healthy plants make grain or just run to stalk."

"And it's up to the weather if we are able to harvest the crop, once we've grown it," interrupted Bob. "The levee will help, but I'm awful scared."

"Best thing for that feeling is *more* work," was Tom's diagnosis. "Haven't you found any other weak spots in our defenses that we could plug up while we've got the chance?"

Needless to say there were many points where industry would not be wasted should the catastrophe, whose possibility was in the back of each lad's mind, occur. If a freshet came, one

which would overtop their levee, it would wipe out overnight all the results of their long labor. It was a horrible thing to contemplate and the only comfort they had was in the feeling that it was like a glorious race — a neck-and-neck finish between harvest and the coming of the flood. Even if they lost, the race would have been well worth the running.

Soon after the boys had planted the field, they had carefully measured out an acre which would be their entry in the Government contest. It lay almost in the center of the field and was marked at the corners by sapling posts. Ned had been made the bookkeeper and he kept exact record of the expenditure of time and money. All this had to be entered on the blanks Mr. Elwood had sent, as on these records the results of the contest were based. The possibility of winning a prize was in each boy's mind and it only made the danger of a sudden freshet more terrifying.

CHAPTER XV

BIG CHRIS ON THE TRAIL

Whiskers had come down once or twice and after each of his visits the boys had felt encouraged and more hopeful about the general situation. The man had commended their levee, advised with them about it, and in every way had proved a good fellow. But he had never explained about himself; in fact, it seemed as if he had forgotten that he was living under a cloud of mystery.

There was no regularity about his comings. The first intimation the boys would have of him would be a shout from the river bank, sometimes early in the day, other times close on dusk.

Therefore, it did not surprise Ned and Tom to hear his cheery hail one morning soon after they had set to work. Bob Hazard had ridden Pony to the postoffice for the mail and had not yet joined his partners when Whiskers showed

up. He came over to them from the river bank.

"Hello, fellows. How's things? Got a job for a laborer this morning?"

"What's the matter with you?" Ned wanted to know. "Cave get too lonesome?"

"Call it that if you like," laughed the man. "Perhaps I just wanted to see your smiling faces. But again I must ask — do you want a farm hand?"

"Sure — if it's you," answered Tom. "There's Bob's hoe — grab it and start."

"Right you are, Boss," was the answer, as Whiskers tackled the row nearest him with vigor. "What's my pay?"

Before this interesting subject could be discussed, they were interrupted by the sight of Bob and Pony coming over the hill at a neck-breaking pace. Straightening up and leaning on their hoes, they watched a pretty piece of horsemanship. Disdaining the road, Bob turned the pony's head toward the steep, stony declivity and sat firm as a rock as his mount half slid, half scrambled down to the level ground.

A little bridge over the dry gulley led to the Island, but it was far around to the side and

would mean a detour if Bob chose that route to get to the spot where his friends were standing. Evidently Bob's need for speed was great, for he headed straight for them.

"Great day in the mornin'," exclaimed Tom. "Old Bob must have whopping news, he's in such a hurry!"

"Look, he's going to jump the ditch!" yelled Ned. "Pony will never do it! Oh-h-h!"

Just at that moment the speeding pony reached the edge of the gully. Bob had not let his mount's stride diminish for a moment and as Ned gave vent to his exclamation, he lifted his bridle-hand. Horse and rider seemed to soar through the air.

"He's made it!" cried Whiskers. "He's made —" but his voice trailed off as he started on a run towards the scene of the jump. What impelled him forward was the fear that the boy and pony were injured. Although the little horse's front feet had landed fair, he had seen the hind legs break through the crumbling edge of the bank.

As he tore along, the sight of the struggling, scrambling animal lent wings to his heels, but

before many strides he knew he was too late to help — the actors in the scene had disappeared in the ditch. Visions of Bob lying crushed at the bottom, and Pony with a broken leg, filled his mind.

Before he could verify his fears, a shout directed his attention and, turning, he saw a sight which brought great relief.

The shout came from Bob, who was still in the saddle and apparently unhurt!

Evidently Pony had kept his balance and, reaching the bottom of the gully, had taken advantage of the first possible place to emerge.

By this time Tom and Ned had caught up with him, Whiskers noted, but Bob's arrival on the heaving pony cut short any comments on the episode. Bob had much to say and was in a hurry to say it.

"Quick, Whiskers, beat it to your canoe! Hustle! Big Chris is headed this way and he will see you. I've just passed him. After what the sheriff told him he'll be suspicious."

"What? What?" gasped the man, but suddenly realizing the situation he started on a run for the bank of the river.

"Start after him, fellows!" cried Bob, urging the tired Pony into action. "Pretend we are trying to catch him. Big Chris is probably in sight!"

The others got the idea of Bob's ruse at once and they began to run. When an emergency arose, Ned could make a wonderful spurt on his crutches and he made believe that this was an emergency. Bob on Pony of course was the quickest and he had a chance to say a word or two to their bearded friend, as the latter paddled off. He could do this with safety as the river was screened by underbrush from the sight of anyone approaching the Island from the high ground.

"We'll keep Big Chris off the scent!" was the way he began. "Don't worry, but make for the cave as soon as possible. We'll come up and tell you how things are as soon as we can! In the meanwhile you'll just have to lie low."

"Good boy!" was Whisker's answer as he shoved off. "I won't forget this!" He wasted no more breath in talking, but dug his paddle into the water with a strength that made the

unwieldy dugout seem to jump from the water.

Tom and Ned joined Bob as the fugitive turned the first bend and a sigh of relief came from all of them that Whiskers was safely gone before Tom's father could reach the scene. Their respite was short-lived, however, for a moment later Big Chris burst through the bushes to find the boys launching their canoe. They seemed to him to be greatly excited.

"Gee, Dad," said Tom, "we almost had that man you were telling me about t'other night! He came up to Ned and me and wanted something to eat. When Bob arrived on Pony, he decided we were strong enough to make it hot for him and he beat it! Has a canoe too — a dugout."

"And we're just going after him!" put in Ned. "Hurry up, fellows, or we'll never catch him! We can talk later."

Big Chris spoke and from what he said the boys knew that he had no suspicion of their being mixed up with the mysterious stranger.

"I reckon I'd better go along with ye. Might get in a hole and need me. Them criminals are desprit when they are caught."

Bob read a consenting look in Tom's eyes and replied: "We'd be glad to have you. That's fine! Get in, sir. Ned, will you stay here and watch out for him? There is only room for three in the *Hazard.*"

Ned could hardly repress a grin as he consented. It would be a lot easier staying behind than paddling Big Chris on a wild goose chase. He felt sure that Tom's father would not give up the hunt until the last moment, and that moment would not come until both Tom's and Bob's backs were too tired to paddle another foot. Therefore, he waved the canoe a cheery good-bye, as it started *down* the river.

It was a matter of constant play-acting for the two boys who accompanied Chris. They had to be on the watch every minute for a man they knew to be miles upstream. Tom's father made the boys tell him over and over again just what had happened when the man had come to the Island. The description they gave was confusing; it could have fitted Big Chris himself as well as Whiskers.

It was not until well into the afternoon that the farmer accepted the fact that their quarry

had escaped. He took it rather badly, because he had been so sure that he would be the one to claim the reward — and five hundred dollars cash is a big sum of money to a renting farmer.

Once the fact was established, however, he made up his mind to the inevitable and was almost good company on the return trip — except when he made remarks about the crop. The boys gave him his first lesson in paddling and, once he got the knack of it, he made the light craft fly over the water. His strength was enormous; a legend of the countryside had it that in his youth he had broken a bull's neck by the power of his arms alone.

Ned was waiting for them at the Island and, naturally, had nothing of interest to report. Big Chris got out and stretched his cramped legs.

"I've been thinkin' o' this pretty hard," he announced, "an' I figger t'would be foolishness to let folks know as we have seen the man. I reckon if anybody can ketch him, I can, so I want ye all to lay low an' say nothin'. Understand?"

This was playing into the boys' hands. They were delighted.

"Yes, sir! And can we help you hunt?"

"Mebbe so. That there li'l' boat will come in handy, but the main thing I want from ye is to keep your eyes skinned an' come an' tell me if ye strike up against anything new. An' — an' if I get the reward, I'll do something nice for ye!"

When the old man was well out of hearing, the boys let go of their pent-up feelings and laughed long and hard. But Tom sobered them with a remark.

"We got Whiskers off this time and I'm glad we did it, although it doesn't seem quite right to fool Pop. What I'm wondering is what we are going to do if Pop starts hunting *up* the river? He will find Whiskers, sure."

"Whiskers will have to leave, that's all I can think of," vowed Ned. "What rotten luck it was that your father should have come down this way to-day!"

"I vote we don't do anything for a day or two until we see whether Big Chris gets tired after he hunts around down the river," put in Bob. "That will give us a little time to decide on the best plan to follow."

As this sounded reasonable, the boys went home. A couple of days later, Tom came to the Island, his face radiating happiness.

"It's all right, fellows, it's all right!" he cried.

"What's all right?" Bob wanted to know.

"Pop and Whiskers and everything. Last night he came home from a chase he had made way down the river, and someone told him that his man had been seen the day before in Henrico County."

"That's good!" Ned exclaimed.

"Wait, there's more. Besides, Pop came across a dugout lying against the river bank three miles below the spot where we turned back the other day and he's sure that it must be the one our man deserted. It's lucky for Whiskers that the last freshet took away somebody's perfectly good boat!"

"And — and it means that your father has given it up as a bad job and that Whiskers is safe?" asked Ned, stammering a little in his excitement.

"Yep! Great, isn't it? We'll go up and tell Whiskers about it in the morning. He can

wait until then. Just now the corn needs hoeing!"

But it was not necessary for them to take the trip the next day. Before the sun grew really hot, a shout from behind the brushes lining the Island's edge proclaimed the fact that Whiskers had come to them instead of their going to him. Fearing a repetition of the scene of a few days before, Bob stayed on guard in the field while Tom and Ned went behind the trees to confer with their friend.

"First of all, I want to thank you for getting me away so cleverly," were the words he greeted them with. "How did you do it? It was mighty important that I was not caught and had to establish my identity. I suppose the whole country is out looking for me right now, isn't it?"

Tom hastened to tell him the good news; that for the time at least he was safe.

"That's fine," said Whiskers. "For it will give us a chance to do something I've come to propose to you. Something important, too, or otherwise I wouldn't have taken the risk of leaving the cave." He laughed. "As I paddled

down, I imagined the woods were full of folks whose one object in life was to find — me! Call Bob, I want him to hear this too!"

When Bob came, Tom asked the question they all wanted answered.

"What's up?"

"Adventure — possibly," said Whiskers impressively.

"Fine! Bully! Great!" chorused the lads.

"Are we in on it?" demanded Bob.

"That's what I came down to find out!"

"We are then!"

"Good!" was Whiskers' comment. "Good, because I need your help. Do you remember what you came to warn me of, Tom? That the sheriff was on my trail?"

"Yes, sir. I'll never forget it," cried Tom.

"Well, I think that the real fellow they were hunting is up the river, in the swamp, not far from my cave."

"He hasn't been caught, then?" Bob exclaimed, drawing a long breath.

"No, we'll do that," asserted Whiskers, confidently.

"But — but," hesitatingly said Ned, "you

don't believe in putting people in prison, do you? Remember what you told us that day up-river? You don't want us to help you catch him?"

"Yes," said Whiskers slowly, "I do want you chaps to help me catch him, but it doesn't naturally follow that I want to turn him over to the authorities. Understand me, I don't mean to say that one should shelter a criminal against the law. It's not the law I quarrel with, but the methods of punishment the law uses. I think a man would be reformed a whole lot quicker if he were put to work on a farm, received a certain amount of trust when he deserved it, and was paid for the work he does, than the way it's tried now. Prison walls, work in shoe shops — and the contractors get all the money. . . . But I'm preaching, and that's a bad habit. What I want to know is: Will you chaps help me?"

Bob led the others in assenting eagerly. The idea of a man-hunt was exciting, fascinating.

"Hop in the canoe, two of you," commanded Whiskers. "T'other one can come with me in the dugout. We'll make better time that way."

CHAPTER XVI

THE POST OF DANGER

The canoes proceeded up the river in single file, the dugout in the lead. Not until the party had landed at the cave's mouth did Whiskers announce his plan of campaign.

"He's not far away from us," he began when all were seated. "In fact, I think that he's quite close, because I've come on his tracks all around here. But to round him up it will be necessary to enter the swamp from several places at once. Otherwise he would be able to slip by. That's why I needed you fellows."

"Hadn't we better get started?" asked practical-minded Tom. "If dark catches us, it won't be easy work plowing about in the swamp."

"Right you are, but a good plan is necessary to every general. The first thing to decide on is what direction would a hunted man take,

supposing we surprised him in the swamp between here and the river? I don't think he will want to swim the river, as it is probable he carries his store of matches with him, and he could not afford to get them wet. Granted that, I should think he'd strike inland, and this dry land here would probably attract him. On that chance, I'm going to give you the post of honor, Ned. You are to stay here and stop him if he comes this way."

For a long moment Ned looked earnestly at Whiskers, trying to decide whether this was not a ruse to leave him in a safe place out of the way. However, the serious look in Whiskers' brown eyes assured him that he was being allotted an honorable portion of the venture.

"As you say, Captain," he answered.

"Here's my automatic," said Whiskers. "It's loaded, but don't use it except as a last resort and as a signal if you sight him. If you do see him, shoot three times quickly."

"What are we to do?" put in Bob.

"We'll do the beating up that will flush our quarry from his hiding place. Tom, you'll come up from the river, while Bob and I circle from

the north. It will take you just about the same time to get to your point as it will us. But wait a minute. Got a watch?"

"Yes — dollar one — keeps railroad time, though."

"Good. It agrees with mine. Just so there won't be any mistake, wait until twelve-fifteen before starting into the swamp. We'll do the same. Here's a rifle, but don't use it unless you have to. Off with you now!"

Ned Moseley watched his companions out of sight with mixed emotions. It hardly seemed possible that the man they sought would make his way to the cave — that he would choose this path from all the rest open to him through the trackless forest. Yet, the confidence bred by the assurance that had been in Whiskers' voice was so strong that his doubts fled. Besides, when he had scrambled up the cliff and found a point of vantage in the old trench, the curious formation of the land made it seem quite possible that the fugitive would come his way. The land on which he stood, while small in extent, was the only considerable piece of solid ground anywhere near. It stuck up from

the surrounding swamps as an island in the sea. There was reason to believe that the man would welcome, if only for a few steps, a change from the soggy going through the morasses which had been his refuge.

But could he capture his man, even if the chance was proffered? Ned did not know, but he did know that he would do his best should the chance come.

Several times there came noises which turned out to be false alarms. Once his heart stood still as a brown shape flashed out of the brush and stopped with a splash in the shallow water of the creek. But one glance sufficed. It was a specimen of the deer which are growing so scarce in our Southern states, a short-tailed doe. She was so beautiful that Ned positively gasped. A second later, startled by some noise too slight for human ears, she was gone, leaving the silence unpopulated.

It was a long wait, and as the afternoon dragged along, its drowsy warmth affected the boy's eyelids. Not daring to move, he was all the more subject to its influence.

Suddenly he jerked wide awake. A crackling

noise quite close to him had broken the stillness. Ned turned, but before his eyes could tell him anything, he felt strong hands on his shoulders. A moment later he had been pulled over backwards, felt himself fall through space, and then — blackness!

Meanwhile the others were not having any too happy a time. To splash about a Virginia swamp, infested with small reptiles and the deadly moccasin is no fun. Especially is it unpleasant when you are not successful in finding the object for which you are braving its dangers, whether 'possum or man.

That they had been unsuccessful was proved when the bedraggled trio met on the little beach in front of the cave after a couple of hours of search.

"See any signs of him?" called Whiskers, as Tom came up to the group.

"Nope," was the disconsolate answer. "But I found four blacksnakes, a water-moccasin and two copperheads. Whew! I don't like that many snakes in one afternoon. You have any luck?"

"Jumped a doe, that's all. Not a sign of

our man. I must have figured it out wrong, for we surely covered every bit of the swamp. Wonder if Ned has had any adventures. He ought to be near us. Ho, Ned!" and Whiskers' voice rang out in a lusty shout.

But there was no answer.

Again he cried out. Then all joined in and strained their ears for an answer. As the echoes ceased to reverberate and no hail rewarded their efforts, they looked at each other, apprehension showing in their faces and sinking deep in their hearts.

"He's not here!" Bob cried. "What—"

"I shouldn't have left him alone," confessed Whiskers bitterly. "But I felt this was the safest place. It would never have done to let him paddle about the swamp."

"Sure!" Tom said. "You were right in that, but *something* has happened to him. The first thing for us to do is to hunt all over this piece of high ground—"

"Come on," said Whiskers.

But before they separated, Tom asked hurriedly: "What made you think the man was hiding in the swamp, Whiskers?"

"Because his tracks all led into it," returned the man. "I'd been off for a couple of days on a fishing trip and when I came back, I found I'd had a visitor who had helped himself liberally to my store of food. I tracked him, and every trail led into the swamp!"

"That's why you thought it would be safe here for Ned?" asked Bob.

"Yes. I guessed that if we jumped our man he would never make for here, as he knew the cave was inhabited, and he'd believe that someone would be on guard."

Tom Wickham had been thinking hard as Whiskers was talking. When the latter had finished, he spoke:

"I think I know what happened —"

"You do?" Whiskers broke in.

"Yes. We've never told you how we rescued Ned that first time?"

"No, but what's *that* got to do with it?"

"A lot, I reckon," exploded Tom. "It seems to me the fellow we're hunting put one over on you! He wasn't in the swamp at all!"

"What!" cried Whiskers in amazement.

Here Bob put in his oar.

"This doesn't seem to be helping old Ned any, all this talk," he cried anxiously. "What does it all mean?"

"If I'm right, it will help, you can bet on that," said Tom shortly, "because we'll need a plan of action. . . . Whiskers, there is a cave behind yours, and also a tunnel that leads from it to the top of the cave!"

"There is? Was that how you got Ned out?"

"Yes, but we'll tell you all the details later. My guess is that our man happened on the back cave while you were away and fixed up his tracks to make you believe he'd gone away again, and all the time he meant to stay right where he was, close to *your* supplies —"

"That sounds plausible. He could come out at night and I'd never know it. But what about Ned?"

"He's been captured! Probably he's in the gun chamber right now —"

"Gun chamber? What do you mean?"

"When we get Ned out, you'll see. The important thing now is to make sure whether I'm right. Bob, you stay in the cave and

watch the hole in the roof over the bed. Whiskers and I will go up the cliff."

When they separated, Whiskers followed Tom up the cliff, expressing his astonishment when he was told of the opening that led into the tunnel right over his bed.

"It's a wonderful piece of work on Nature's part," he panted. "All the months I've been there I've only noticed a depression in the rock, which did not seem important enough to investigate. I hardly ever took my lantern back there, or perhaps I might have seen it."

When they reached the trench, Tom ran down it until he came to the spot where the entrance to the tunnel had been found. So cleverly had it been covered with brush that he almost fell in it.

"I'm right, Whiskers, I'm right!" he exulted. "Someone's been around, because we left the hole wide open when we were here last."

Whiskers began to examine closely the ground surrounding the tunnel's mouth.

"All this has been freshly disguised," he stated. "There must have been a struggle and the ground torn up. It's cleverly done and

would deceive the casual glance, but I see several dents made by Ned's crutches. Ned is in that hole, all right, and — it's my fault."

The big man felt his responsibility very deeply, but it did not blind him to the fact that something must be done at once. Throwing off his coat, he made ready to plunge down the shaft.

"Wait," cautioned Tom; "don't do that. I reckon there's a better plan if we can dope it out. If you go down now, our man is probably on the watch and he will have the better of you because the tunnel is small and you won't be able to move freely. Don't you think so?"

The man had to admit the wisdom of this.

"You seem to be running this stunt," he said, "and I think you are doing it better than I could. Let's have your idea."

"The first thing to do is to block this entrance so tight that it can't be opened from inside. Then we can go down to the cave and let Bob in on our planning."

A large log and a couple of boulders solved the problem, and a few moments later they had joined Bob in the cave. The latter had nothing

to report, but he was anxious about Ned. After Whiskers had told him what he and Tom had learned on the cliff top, he asked:

"But — but what if the man has — has killed Ned?"

Whiskers hastened to reassure him.

"An embezzler very rarely has the nerve to murder anybody, because he is really not a vicious criminal, but only a weak sort of chap who can't resist temptation. Ned's all right as far as his health's concerned."

This was heartening to the boys, but in reality Whiskers was not so sure that his words were true. Feeling himself to blame for what had happened, he pictured to himself all sorts of terrible things that could have occurred to the lad who was missing.

"What do you plan next?" was Bob's inquiry.

"Tom's got an idea, and as he knows the lay of the land I think we ought to hear it. Go ahead; let's have it."

"All right, then. In the first place, I don't believe Ned's jailor has found the passage leading into this cave yet, and if that's so I think

we've got a chance to get Ned and capture our man at the same time."

In a few words, Bob and Tom explained to Whiskers how the two passages ran from the gun chamber, and that it was only by chance that the one leading into the cave had been discovered.

"I see," he said at last, when he had the layout in his mind. "And your plan, Tom, is to attract our friend's attention in the upper passage while a couple of us gain the mysterious gun chamber and thus cut off his escape?"

"That's it," exclaimed Tom. "Do you think it will work?"

"It will *have* to," was the determined answer. "I don't know any better plan. Show me the entrance here in the cave."

Whiskers gasped with astonishment when the boys proved to him that the irregularity in the roof of the cave really hid a passage.

"All right," he said; "now for it. I'll go up and coax our rabbit into the tunnel — "

"I know that's the most dangerous part, but you are needed a whole lot more in the chamber when he backs out," objected Tom hurriedly.

"We must not take any chance of his being able to get away. He will surely fight like a wildcat when he's cornered and then you will be in demand where there is room for your strength. I'll do for up there. Besides, I'm smaller and can dodge about in the passage easier."

As Bob started to put in his claim for the honor of the most dangerous post, all three were electrified by a sharp hissing sound which came from over their heads.

With one accord they all jumped, so unexpected had been the noise. Whiskers turned the rifle he was still holding on the hole in the roof, thinking that their quarry had found the passage and had surprised them. Then came a chuckle and a well-known voice.

"Don't shoot, fellows, it's only Ned!" And with that Ned's face appeared in the opening.

For a moment their relief to find their friend safe and sound was so great that they could say nothing. Before their questions came, Ned spoke quickly:

"I'll tell you all about it soon, but right now I want you all to follow me back to the gun room and meet the *Duke of Wellington!*"

CHAPTER XVII

THE AUDIENCE WITH HIS GRACE

This astounding request was dumbfounding to Ned's hearers. The Duke of Wellington! Was the boy crazy? They plied him with questions until, in order to get them started, he had to explain:

"He's insane! The loneliness of dodging about the country and swamps since he escaped has made him go loony. Thinks he is the Duke and is perfectly happy because he has captured me — says I'm Napoleon. Me, Napoleon! And it's the embezzler all right, because he rambled about Roanoke and the bank. Finally I got away by saying I'd bring back with me Marshal Ney, Talleyrand, and the King of Rome, to do him honor. So come along, Ney, King and Talleyrand, to the audience! I'm not hurt — my story will wait."

The change from the tragic to the ridiculous

was too sudden for laughter. Ned squirmed around and headed the other way. Whiskers gave Bob and Tom a leg up and then swung himself into the passage.

The way was familiar to the boys, but to Whiskers it was strange. Also, he felt a little foolish to think that all the time he had inhabited the cave this tunnel was right over his head and he had never known it.

When the path broadened, they found that the chamber was somewhat illuminated by the fitful light of an old lantern. The object of their interest was, however, the man who was seated on a pile of old muskets.

Even in the uncertain light it was possible to get a fair sight of the man who had given them so much worry. He was small, almost frail, and the ragged growth of beard looked strangely out of place on the face that carried two staring eyes. His head was round and rather large, and a fringe of gray hair circled his bald pate as a coral island surrounds a lagoon.

As they filed in, he waved his hand in silent greeting. Ned went forward and spoke:

"Your Grace, as I promised, I brought these vassals of mine to render homage to you. It is your due after licking me so badly to-day at Waterloo!"

"You have done well, Bonaparte. Let them advance," the little man returned in a voice which from want of use was squeaky. Not a bit disturbed was he by the sad lapses from court speech indulged in by Ned, or the fact that Napoleon never lost a leg at Waterloo, no matter what else he lost.

Bob was the first. Advancing with a bow, he dropped on one knee.

"I, the King of Rome, do acknowledge thee as War Lord."

At a grave nod from the unfortunate little man, Tom took Bob's place.

"And I, Talleyrand, shall be your slave."

It was Whiskers' turn. Although he knew it was wise to humor the poor fellow, he thought the foolery had gone far enough. A plan to get poor Simson out of the cavern came to him in a flash.

"Oh, Wellington, it is my good fortune to be the first of your countrymen to congratulate you

on your tremendous victory. I am honored, although it was not my fate to fight at your side. The King of England, God bless him, has sent me as Envoy Extraordinary to tell you of his great obligation to you and to summon you to England at once to receive the marks of his signal appreciation. Does it please you to start?"

Simson rose and extended his hand, not a whit dismayed that Marshal Ney had turned out to be somebody else.

"My good Pitt, our sovereign does me too much honor. But I will go."

The crazed brain of the Duke saw nothing incongruous in the manner of emerging from his refuge. Helped from behind by Tom and pulled along by Whiskers, he came through the tunnel and was finally disposed on Whiskers' pallet. A moment later the sound of his regular breathing told that sleep had claimed him.

Whiskers and the boys had moved to the front of the cave, to find that dusk had come upon them.

"It looks like rain," said Tom. "Thunder storm, I reckon; it's been hot enough all day."

The group settled down by the cave's mouth and discussed the strange happenings of the day in low tones. The thing of most interest was Ned's recital. He told of his long wait and then his being suddenly attacked and lapsing into unconsciousness.

"I woke up as I was being dragged through the tunnel into the gun chamber. Then I knew what had happened. The Duke must have come up out of the hole and seen me. As I was quite close to the tunnel's mouth, it was an easy matter for him to pull me back into it. The landing must have knocked the wind out of me. When we got to the gun room and he began to ramble in his talk and call himself Wellington, I — I just naturally thought of calling myself Napoleon. After that he was all right; all I had to do was to be properly humble. When I suggested going for Ney and t'others, I didn't really figure on bringing you back with me. I just reckoned it a way to escape."

"But this way we've got him, too!" put in Bob.

"Yes, but what are we going to do with him? Can't very well keep him here!"

"No," said Whiskers, "we mustn't keep him. The best thing will be to turn him over to the authorities —"

"What!" exploded Tom.

"Keep your shirt on," cautioned Whiskers with a smile. "This poor chap is sick — sick in mind — and it will be best for him if he is taken to a hospital. The State does not harm its insane. I wish I could make them see that *all* criminals are insane, and have them cured instead of treated as beasts. But, what do you know? — it's raining!"

It was no thunderstorm, for the rain came down gently, in fine streams, hardly making any noise. A little breeze stirred.

"That wind is from the east, boys," said Whiskers. "First easterly storm this summer. How about your levee?"

"It's as good as we can make it," was the answer, as fear settled on each boy that the time of trial was at hand. "Do you think this is going to be a big storm?"

"I shouldn't wonder. It's always bad when it comes from the east. How about your corn? High enough so it can stand a flood?"

"Not by a long shot," answered Tom. "It's all tasseled, and some of it is making ear, but the way that water rushes over the Island would soon put it all down flat — and it's good-bye corn crop."

"Well, cheer up. Just as likely it will stop before morning. That reminds me; do you boys have to get back to-night?"

"Since we've had the canoe," answered Ned, "no one worries unless we are away *two* nights."

"Then I guess you'd better bunk here to-night, as I'm afraid it would be pretty hard going home without a moon and the storm growing. Better have a fire, I guess."

When a blaze was started and a pot swung for cooking supper, they went back to their talk.

"If we take the Duke back and give him up there will be a reward of five hundred dollars. Do you think you'll take it?" asked Bob of Whiskers.

"Me take the reward? What have I got to do with it?"

"You found him. The reward's yours."

"Not for a moment. If it's claimed, it

belongs to you boys — particularly Ned. He did the work!"

"Don't let's worry who gets it. The question is, should we claim it?" put in Tom, a little puzzled as to the ethics of the matter.

Whiskers hesitated, then pronounced: "Yes, I think it would be fair to take it. If we did not claim it, some sheriff would, without deserving it at all. *That* would do no one any good. But we'll decide definitely later when we get the poor chap in safe hands. Now tell me about the gun chamber. I can see how it helped you to get Ned away from me. That *was* a joke and it was entirely on *me*."

Supper was ready before the story about the gun room was told. Soon after they bunked in as best they could on the hard floor of the cave, but not before Whiskers had told them he thought their find of the relics in the cave would be even more profitable to them than the reward offered for their prisoner. Any museum would be crazy to have them.

A little later they slept, and the rain, increasing in violence, made sleep-music as it fell.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FRESHET — AND A SURPRISE

Tom awoke shortly after dawn to look out on a scene that made his heart sink. A glance showed him that the stream which ran in front of the cave had swollen until it was a foot higher than its normal level.

He woke the others to share his fears. The rain was coming down in sheets and, besides, the wind from the east, which last night had been but a breeze, whistled through the trees in a fury.

"We must get to the Island," was Tom's decision, "and get there quick."

"You're right," agreed Whiskers. "We'll get the Duke covered up as much as possible and then start."

"What," cried Bob, "are you coming, too?"

"Of course!" exclaimed the man. "Do you think I'd desert you now? Every bit of help may be needed — that crop *must* be saved if

there is a human way to do it! And we'll have to take the Duke, as he can't stay here alone, that's sure."

They wasted no time in getting ready. All their energy was expended in getting back to their beloved corn.

The Duke was installed in the dugout and covered against the wet with everything available, each of the others contributing some article of his own clothing. Consequently, they had hardly started before all were thoroughly, soppingly wet.

Their charge was easy to handle, for since he had been put to bed he had stayed in a sort of coma, hardly noticing what was being done with him. Whiskers had an explanation ready:

"He couldn't stand the loneliness and the horror of the woods, so he went crazy. Now, when he has human beings around him, he is content to be cared for. Poor chap, he must have had a hard time of it."

It was an exciting trip back to the Island. Once an especially ferocious gust of wind came along and tore a great limb off one of the wild locust trees that bordered the river, flinging it

into the stream. It missed the stern of the boys' canoe by inches. If it had fallen a moment sooner it would have smashed the craft and the boys with it. So intent were they on reaching the Island, however, they hardly commented on their narrow escape.

The level of the big river was not so easily affected by the rain as had been the little stream which ran in front of the cave, yet it was easy to see that there had been enough rain to make a perceptible difference. Whiskers did all he could to cheer up the boys as they landed on the Island, yet the apprehension of disaster bit deep into them. He saw that the only thing that would help was to keep them employed — if their hands were busy their minds would have some rest.

"Whose house is the nearest?" he demanded.

"Mine," said Tom.

"Right. Then we'll take the Duke there. Tom, you and Bob take him along, while Ned and I make the canoes safe." He hesitated a moment, then: "Have you chaps any bags — grain sacks or canvas ones that cement comes in?"

"No," they answered. "Why?"

"I just happened to think that bags filled with dirt are mighty handy to stop water, if the river should find a weak spot in our levee. I used them out in Colorado once, when the dam I was building — " He stopped short, as if biting off an indiscretion.

"Pop's got a lot of cement bags," said Tom, finally. "He bought 'em cheap from a railroad contractor who was busted; but he's never had time to turn 'em in — but, shucks, he wouldn't give 'em to us. I know him."

"You've *got* to get them," asserted Whiskers. "They will be worth their weight in gold if the water comes as high as I think it will — "

It was Ned who interrupted.

"You say *I* deserve the reward for catching the Duke. Does it belong to me if we collect it?"

"Yes," the others chorused, although surprised at his sudden cupidity.

"All right, then, it's mine. And now I want Tom to offer it to Big Chris for the bags!"

Whiskers led the whoop of appreciation of the generous offer.

"Well, don't I want to see *my* crop saved? What's so generous about that?" Ned demanded as they crowded around him. "Hustle along. It's not fair to the Duke; he's sick enough now without getting wet through."

Supporting the sick man between them, Bob and Tom led him slowly off towards the high ground.

A little later Whiskers and Ned were interrupted in making a minute examination of the banks of the river for a weak spot in the defenses, by a shout and the clatter of horses' hoofs on the bridge leading from the mainland. They looked up to find Tom urging towards them his father's team, which was hooked up to the dump wagon.

"I — I made him do it!" he exulted, as he pulled up. "And got the loan of the team to bring the bags down. I brought shovels, too."

Then Whiskers took charge. He directed where the bags were to be put, dividing them into piles at each strategic point. Tom then took the team back, carrying with him orders to return as soon as possible.

Still it rained, and still the wind blew; yet

so hard did Whiskers work the boys that, instead of being down-hearted under their wet clothes, they were almost cheerful.

The first thing that had been done was the erection of a river gauge. Whiskers had cut a pole, skinned off the bark and laid off regular notches along its length. This was securely placed upright in the river and lashed to the branch of an overhanging tree. It was Bob's duty to report the gain the water made each hour.

Then began the real work. All the bags were to be filled and Whiskers saw that they were. Not that any of the boys needed urging, but the man's cheery encouragement lightened the back-breaking labor of shoveling.

All day long the rain never slackened. If anything, it grew worse. Each report that Bob made as to the stage the water had gained on the gauge, Whiskers entered into a notebook.

At noontime Bob Hazard had gone up to the Big House and had brought food to them. His going had been slow, but Pony brought him back like the wind.

All during the afternoon the little horse had

stood, with its tail to the storm, ready to carry anyone on an emergency errand. His attitude was dejected, yet resigned, as if he figured it all a necessary part of this queer summer.

As the figures in Whiskers' notebook registered gain after gain in the level of the water, the boys worked feverishly.

At five in the afternoon half the bags were full and the river was rushing by only four feet from the top of their levee. Whiskers was grave but his smile was on tap when needed.

"Don't worry, fellows; it will come out all right." It encouraged them mightily. Besides, Whiskers had worked with a will, shoveling, inspecting, lending a hand where it was most needed.

He sent them to gather large quantities of light wood and pine knots as dusk closed in. This he distributed along the banks.

"We'll need light and warmth all night, boys. It's going to be *some* night!"

Then the rain stopped almost as suddenly as it had begun. The wind kept blowing, but only long enough to clear the sky of clouds. The moon shone, but the fires were needed.

The boys were exultant.

"It's all right now!" they cried. "We've won out!" But their joy was cut short by Whiskers:

"I'm sorry, old fellows, but the battle's only begun. The rain has stopped, but it will be hours before the river drops. All the little streams up-river are just collecting the water now that will come swirling past here shortly. Bob, read the gauge again."

When Bob came back he found a solemn group awaiting him.

"It — it's only two — two feet from the top!"

Whiskers put the figures in his book and arose.

"Now, lads, comes the fight. We will each take a stretch of bank to patrol. If there is danger, yell and all of us will bring sand bags until the weak place is safe. I wish we could have filled more — about how many are left empty?"

"About a third, I reckon," answered Tom quietly.

"Well, it can't be helped. We have done

what we could. Besides patroling, it's the duty of each to keep the fire nearest him going. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," came the ready answer, and they scattered to their stations.

To someone not vitally interested, the scene must have been wonderful. A ring of light given by the dancing flames of the fires placed at intervals, the shadows of the boys pacing their beats beside the rushing water, and over all the calm moon, undisturbed by the clash of elements against the will of man.

Slowly, agonizingly, the water crept up and up the bank. The two-foot leeway was cut to one foot at the lowest spot. The steady encroachment of the enemy with whom they could do nothing was heart-breaking to the boys.

Suddenly a shout of alarm broke the air. It was Ned. A thin rivulet of water had worked its way beside a root and in an instant had become a stream, cutting a breach in his wall.

The others raced to him, catching up sand bags on the run. Plop! plop! plop! the bags fell into the breach. The water slackened,

finally stopped, and then sullenly slipped by the new wall that had been reared.

Hardly were they back at their posts when Whiskers called. The enemy had found a weak place in his beat. Another rush of activity and it, too, was conquered.

"She's still gaining," Whiskers called after them, as they returned to their beats. "But more slowly now. We've got a chance, fellows."

Again and again they conquered the invading water. Exhausted, spent, they rose to new efforts, refusing to be beaten. The river still rose, but by fractions of inches, slowly, hesitatingly.

"The turn *must* come!" cried Whiskers. "It's got to! Hold on a little longer. Buck up!"

He tongue-lashed them to further heroic deeds. They could not falter with him back of them, encouraging, urging, working like a giant himself.

After one particularly violent struggle, the terrible conviction came that there were but few more bags filled, ready as ammunition for use against the enemy.

"All right, fellows," shouted the man, "we'll have to double our beats and the others fill bags. I'll start."

The next overflow almost caught them napping, and the supply of bags fell short; but at last the water was conquered. Another break would surely be too much for them.

"Reckon it's got us," said Bob shortly. "But it's been a good fight."

"Buck up! We're not beaten until it happens," cried Tom grimly. "If only we had some filled bags — "

At that moment Ned chanced to look up from his work. Straightening up, he shouted:

"Look, everybody! Someone's coming over the hill! Maybe it's help!"

"Nope," answered Tom. "It's Pop coming down to crow over us." His tone was very bitter.

But the swaying lanterns proved that there were more people coming than just Big Chris. When they came into the circle of firelight the leader proved to be John D. Elwood. Behind him was Brother Eddy and the two negro hands from the Big House farm. Farther in the rear,

somewhat abashed, was the hulking form of Big Chris. All were armed with shovels. Elwood wasted no words.

"Came to help! Reckon you need it. What's the weak spot?"

Just then a shout came from Whiskers, who had been at the levee when the newcomers arrived.

"The levee, boys! Quick! Your shovels!"

So amazed was Tom at the sight of his father hurrying with the others to the danger spot, that he could hardly move. But when, after gathering his faculties, he reached the levee and found his father doing the work of two men, strengthening the dam, he was perilously close to tears.

"What do you know about Pop?" he asked himself, as his tired arms flung shovelful after shovelful of dirt. "What do you know about Pop?"

CHAPTER XIX

WHISKERS — ALIAS STEVE WHITNEY

The encounter at the levee proved to be for the river what the Battle of the Marne was to the Germans, for it spent its last strength there and then had to drop back, beaten. The unexpected reinforcements had come in the nick of time.

For a long time the water held its last level, doggedly holding on, hoping to gather new strength with which to overwhelm the barriers that each moment were rising higher against it. At last, however, a shout from Bob Hazard told the panting group that the gauge showed the water had receded two inches.

"Whoopee!" yelled someone. They turned to find that the exuberant person was none other than Big Chris. When the latter realized he was the object of everyone's attention he tried, unsuccessfully, to look unconcerned — as

if the shout had come from anyone else except himself.

"You can't fool me, Pop!" cried Tom, rushing up to him. "You *are* glad we won out, aren't you? You proved it when you came to help us."

"No —" growled the big man. "Still think it a passel o' foolishness. But I sure hated to see a good crop drownded — goes against the grain, sorter. Besides, this here young feller is responsible — coming and blackguarding me to give ye a hand."

This brought attention to John Elwood. But it was Brother Eddy who explained:

"Yes, I'm afraid it was Mr. Elwood who brought us to a sense of what we ought to do," he began, speaking slowly in his musical voice. "We did not think to give the boys a little help when they most needed it, until Mr. Elwood fortunately happened in and saw in a glance how matters were. It was he who got the men together and who roused up Big Chris here. Aren't you glad now he did, Chris, old fellow?"

"Can't say as I be," was the ungracious reply, but the tone was trembly.

"*We're* certainly much obliged to you all, Mr. Moseley," stated Tom, "and to Mr. Elwood, too, but the man we must thank most is — is Whiskers!"

"Whiskers?" echoed the group. "Who is Whiskers?"

"The man who really saved our crop, who has worked with us all night and who first planned the levee. Come along, Whiskers, and meet —"

They had moved from the levee after the battle was won to one of the fires. At Tom's call, Whiskers, who had forgotten in the excitement of the battle that he was again mixing with his fellowmen, started back. He was not quick enough, for a flash from a pine knot, which had just caught fire, lighted up his face. With a half-startled exclamation, Elwood leaped forward and, catching Whiskers by the hands, pumped them up and down vigorously.

"Steve!" gasped Elwood. "You old warrior, is it really you?"

"Johnny!" was Whiskers' exclamation. "What are you doing here? After me? I never thought it would be you who found me!"

"Well, you certainly needed finding, all right," returned the other. "What have you been up to?"

"Hiding," answered Whiskers, alias Steve, tersely. "When Pat Gilligan framed up that case on me before the commission — "

"Yes — yes, I know all that," cried Elwood impatiently, "but that's all over and done with. They got to the bottom of it, and of course you were cleared — "

"What!" yelled Whiskers. "I'm clear? You mean it?"

"Of course. You don't mean to say you haven't heard of it?"

"Not one word. I — I knew that if I could keep out of the way until the August rains my old dam out there would prove me right — and Gilligan wrong! If I'd stuck around Washington something awful would have happened to me by then. It's been lonely hiding, but the boys have helped."

Tearing himself away from his friend, Whiskers spoke to the boys who had been watching the scene curiously.

"Fellows, it's *all* right," he called out.

"Everything is in fine shape. I can tell you all about it now."

That there was a connection between their friend Whiskers and the Government agricultural agent was the mystifying thing to the boys. "You are a friend of Mr. Elwood?" stammered Bob of Whiskers.

"You *can* bet we're friends," volunteered Elwood, before the other had a chance to reply. "Went to college together and entered the Government service together — he, engineering; and I, farming."

"And we thought the Government was *after* you!" chuckled Ned.

"It was. It certainly desired the presence in Washington of Stephen Whitney, Resident Engineer, U. S. Reclamation Service, now in *your* service, but the said Stephen believed he was better off in Virginia."

"Tell 'em all about it," urged Elwood. "They won't sleep till they hear it, if I'm any judge." He was backed up by the boys. The negro farm hands, after being thanked for their help, went home singing. Brother Eddy decided to stay, and, curiously enough, so did Big Chris.

He wouldn't own up to being curious, and explained: "You folks are all tuckered out, and when you get finished with your talk you'll want to sleep. *Somebody's* bound to look after the crop in case the water gets rambunctious. Might as well be me, I reckon."

Big Chris had had a hard and puzzling day. First, the gift of the prisoner, which practically meant five hundred dollars, had jolted his idea of generosity. Then, the warm feeling that helping the boys had brought to him, was disquieting. The impulse to be kindly persisted, and the only remnant of respect for himself that he could cling to was to do his kindnesses in a grudging and gruff manner. But it pleased him when he was asked to be one of the group to listen to Whiskers' story.

Before the latter began, however, Brother Eddy asked how the boys had made Whiskers' acquaintance. Bob rapidly sketched the events that had spread out over the summer, so that everything was clear to the whole group. When he had finished, Tom spoke up:

"Now, Whiskers — I mean Mr. Whitney — go ahead."

"All right, Tom, but let me tell you I like that name of Whiskers. Keep on calling me by it. It will remind me always of three mighty plucky boys. I hope you will like me as well after I've shaved them off. But, to my story, which isn't so very wonderful:

"In the first place, the Reclamation Service is designed to add new fertile areas to the farm lands of the United States. We build dams, construct irrigation projects that make gardens of deserts, orchards out of sun-beaten stretches of sand. It's good work.

"But there are drawbacks. There are some people who believe that all Government projects are started for the express purpose of letting them graft — and the reclamation projects are no exception to this rule. I had charge of a dam construction in Colorado last year. It was going fine. I was proud of it, sure of its worth as the concrete grew higher and higher. Then, little by little, things began to happen which aroused my suspicions. The concrete was poor, although the cement sacks were those of the reputable firm to which I'd given the contract. My assistants were transferred and new ones

I did not know were sent to me. At last one day one of the contractors, Pat Gilligan, came and attempted to bribe me to pass some rotten work. I wouldn't; made him do it over and preferred charges against him. But I was too late; he had determined to be revenged on me, and had, through his pull, got me first. In a report to the commissioner he said that I was in on the deal for the inferior cement and — so strong was his pull with the politicians at Washington — that he railroaded through the case against me.

"When I was summoned to appear, I refused to go, as a friend had told me what a wonderful case Gilligan had manufactured against me. Instead, I slipped off to the cave up the river here, which I had run across on a hunting trip a year or so before. I knew, and only I knew, just how violent that stream out there would be when swollen with the autumn rains. It was a matter of record to just what height the dam had risen under my superintendence — and I was sure that it would not suffer in comparison with that which was built after I left. It seemed to me pretty sure that my part would stand

while Gilligan's was swept away. When that happened, I could come back, my work having proved my case. If I'd showed up when they wanted me, all sorts of dire things would have happened, probably, and my vindication would have come when it was too late. That's about all my story, as Johnny Elwood says it's all cleared up now."

"It is," repeated the latter. "You might just as well have come to Washington, for Gilligan slipped up on some important details, and the commissioner pounced on him. It would have saved you the rotten summer you must have — "

"I've not had a rotten summer," asserted the engineer. "It's been good sport since I met these young disciples of yours. If I hadn't been worried about the dam, it would have been ideal."

"You needn't worry about your beloved old dam," said Elwood. "It's safe enough. When Gilligan showed himself up, they sent old Tad Adams out to sit on the job until you came back. You'd better hustle out there if you want to be in time for the dedication services. Tad's a hustler!"

Whiskers was happy; it was easy to see that.

"You bet I'll go, just as quickly as I can. It will be great to get back on the job again. Whoopee!" He was boyish in his enthusiasm. "But I'll be sorry to leave before I know the crop is all right."

The boys hung expectant on Elwood's answer.

"You needn't worry about that," he said earnestly. "If all of it is like the few stalks I've seen here at the edge, this crop will be a prize winner!"

"Do ye mean to say that this here crop is goin' to measure up more'n a hundred bushels to the acre?" the incredulous voice of Big Chris rasped.

"I certainly do!" was the confident answer. "Why not? A hundred bushels isn't much."

"Isn't much?" snorted the old man. "It's plumb impossible. Don't believe it, no sir! Do you, Brother Eddy?"

"I just can't rightly say," was Mr. Moseley's comment. "Mr. Elwood seems to know, and I do not think he would say anything of which he was not sure."

Finding no support, Big Chris stamped off

without further comment, to look at the river.

While Whiskers had been telling his story, Bob Hazard had followed every word. He seemed to live every moment with his friend and at the mention of the dam he was sure that dam-building was the one thing he wished to do in the future. Farming was all right, but the big projects were the things that stirred his imagination. Spurred by his enthusiasm, he stammered:

"Is — is there any — anything that a fellow can — can do out on a dam job like that?"

Whiskers turned and looked at him.

"You like the idea, Bob? Does it make you anxious to help a waste place to become green?"

"Yes — yes!" cried Bob, his eyes shining.

"Then, Johnny, I guess you've lost a disciple and I've gained one," said Whiskers, laughing, to his friend. "Bob wants to desert the hoe for the transit." Then answering the boy: "Yes, there is work for a boy to do — work that will help him when he starts studying to be an engineer."

Bob said nothing, but a determination to spend his next summer with Whiskers became

rooted in him. The talk grew desultory and Brother Eddy interrupted:

"I hope, sir, you will make the Big House your home for as long as it is convenient for you? I think that all of us could do with some rest."

"It will give me great pleasure to accept your hospitality," returned Whiskers, falling naturally into the formal language with which Mr. Moseley always surrounded anything to do with the hospitality of his house. "It will be a great treat to sleep between sheets once more."

A little later the Island was deserted except for the lonely figure of Big Chris, who paced the banks, watching the dark water slip by.

CHAPTER XX

THE ESCAPE

In spite of his exhaustion from the violent exertions of the preceding day and night, Tom Wickham awakened and was waiting patiently on the stoop of the Big House before any of his friends appeared.

"Hello," he called, as Mr. Elwood and Ned came out of the door. "I reckoned you were going to sleep until to-morrow morning."

"What time is it now?" asked Mr. Elwood.

"'Bout four in the afternoon. You-all must have slept twelve hours."

"I could sleep twelve more if I was *sure* that the corn is all right —" said Ned.

"Go back to bed, then, go back to bed," laughed Tom, interrupting. "It's all there and the river is down two feet."

"How do you know?" a new voice carried the inquiry. It was Whiskers; but for a moment Tom and Ned recognized only the voice, for

when they turned they saw a strange clean-shaven young man coming out of the door.

"Why — why, you're almost good-looking!" stammered Tom. And Whiskers led the laugh that greeted the sally. When the merriment died down, the latter repeated his question:

"Seriously, Tom, how do you know things are all right?"

"I've been down there," Tom said. "I woke up early and couldn't go to sleep again until I *knew*."

"That's the proper spirit!" cried Elwood. "Was your father still there?"

"Yes, but as the water level was getting below the bottom of any of our levees, he was about ready to go back to his work. "'Good stand o' corn,'" he said to me, "'but don't ye think for a minute you scamps are goin' to crop a hundred bushel — an' don't think I take any stock in these doin's beyond tryin' to save sinful waste — 'cause I don't!'"

The knowledge that all danger was past lightened the hearts of the group and they chuckled over the last stand that Big Chris was making against the attack of modern methods.

"Don't worry, Tom," said Elwood. "All the signs point to your being your father's partner next year — and the crops will be grown your way."

Bob Hazard created a diversion by coming out of the house rubbing his eyes.

"You'll have to get along with less sleep than that, if you're to be an engineer, Bob," said the whiskerless Whiskers, with a smile. "The Reclamation Service never sleeps."

"I'll learn, then," returned the Northern boy. "I wasn't sleeping just now; I was unconscious — as if someone had hit me over the head with a club!"

The bunch laughed.

"A good excuse, old man," said Steve Whitney, "a mighty good excuse, but you'll have to be able to overcome little things like that if you are going to be my rod man next summer — "

"What!" almost yelled Bob Hazard. "You want me to be with you next summer?"

"Yes — if you want to come."

"Want to come?" The boy's voice showed that that was what he wanted above everything else. "You just bet I do!"

"When I saw how you took to building the levee I knew that farming would not hold you long."

"Careful, Steve," laughed Elwood, "don't take away *all* my disciples."

"No fear," returned the other. "Tom and Ned are with you."

"I am," put in Tom, "but I don't think Ned is so sure, are you, Ned?"

"Until this crop is in." Ned did not confess just what his plans for the future were.

"I am satisfied with having Tom remain faithful," said Mr. Elwood. "I feel sure that nothing will ever seem so attractive to him as making things grow. He and I feel the same way. Go on, Steve, with your plans for Bob."

"Well, the instinct for building is not given to everyone, and when somebody comes along who's got it, he ought to be helped. When next summer comes, I'll have a place for Bob on my corps, no matter where I am."

"Then I've got the instinct?" questioned Bob, his eyes shining. "It's what I've wanted to be sure of."

"No doubt about it," asserted Steve Whitney.

"No doubt at all. But you'll have to study hard all winter and pay especial attention to logarithms. Won't he, Mr. Moseley?" he finished, appealing to the old gentleman, who now joined the group.

The next day Whiskers and Elwood left Crossways together, the former anxious to get back to his beloved dam and the latter drawn by his duty to the other Corn Clubs he had organized throughout the State. The boys saw them off, a little sad at losing the man with whom they had had so many adventures. Bob Hazard, however, felt that the winter would be pleasant, since he had the promise of the sort of job he wanted for the next summer.

"I thought you wanted to go fishing with your Dad this summer," observed Ned slyly, after he and Tom had listened to a long recital of what Bob imagined the next summer would hold for him. "Don't you think it will be just as much fun next year?"

"Dad can come out to the job if he wants to fish," returned Bob, impertinently. "I guess Whiskers will let me off once in a while."

Ned and Tom nearly exploded with laughter.

What a change had come over their chum! Tom could understand Bob's enthusiasm, for he felt the same way about farming. It was Ned who was just a little downcast because no road seemed to lead to the thing he wanted to do.

Tom happened to look down the road which led from his father's place to Crossways. The boys were sitting on their favorite top rail of the fence just outside the schoolhouse.

"Great day, fellows! I wonder what Pop is coming up here for in such a hurry."

The others looked too and saw Tom's father covering the intervening ground with long strides. A moment later he called to them and they set off to meet him. Big Chris' first words were startling.

"He's escaped!"

"Who? Who?" the boys wanted to know, on edge with interest.

"Simson — that — that Duke feller — he's gone!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHASE BEGINS

This was news with a vengeance. So surprising was it that for a moment or two the boys could not ask any questions. Big Chris supplied enough information, however, to make up.

"He seemed so porely and ill I figger'd yer mother could handle him. I turned the key in the lock an' left him. Didn't go fur but when I came back, he was gone! Slipped out o' the winder, I reckon; that's what it seems like to me."

"Oh, we'll get him back," said Ned. "Weak as he is, he can't have gone far!"

"It ain't gettin' him back what's pesterin' me," returned the old man, "but I've done gone an' told the sheriff to tote around his reward and tote away the pris'ner. He aims to come in the mornin' and I ain't got the pris'ner to turn over. When he finds I ain't got him he's

certain sure to start out to hunt the Duke himself an' if he ketches him, he's goin' to git that reward. I won't see a copper of it!"

There was truth in what Big Chris said and the boys knew it. It was a bad mess and each tried to think of some way out of it. A sudden idea struck Ned and he blurted out:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wickham. You gave us those cement bags for the island in return for the Duke and now you haven't the reward, and we've had the bags —"

"That ain't your fault," returned the big man. He spoke rather ungraciously. "I let him git away. You handed him to me an' if I couldn't keep him, that's my fault. But I want to know what sort o' tale I'm goin' to tell Sheriff Beasley."

Ned had to admire Big Chris. No matter how great a disappointment came to him, or how much it cost him, Chris Wickham could be counted on to be just. Up to this time he had not been generous but he would not take advantage of anyone or expect more than was his just due. Ned's thoughts were interrupted by a suggestion from Bob.

"If we could only get him back to-morrow before the sheriff gets here — "

"Surely, surely," was the farmer's rather contemptuous interruption, "if we could get the moon — "

Bob Hazard was but little abashed, for he came back at once to the attack:

"Well we might! Don't you think so, fellows? We've still got about three hours of daylight to hunt in. Besides, I don't think he could have gone far. When we brought him down from the cave he was mighty weak."

The other boys agreed.

"We might as well get on the job, Pop," added Tom. "We're wasting a lot of valuable time whether we find him this evening or not!"

"Do you think he went back to the cave, Tom?" put in Ned, as they all started in the direction of Big Chris's farm.

"Perhaps. But the first thing to do is to see if we can find any trace of him around the house. Let's hurry."

Bob Hazard had been thinking over Ned's suggestion as to the possibility of the Duke's returning to the cave.

"I think Ned may be right," he said. "I vote we split forces. Ned and I will go up to the cave in the canoe, while you, Tom, and your father see what you can find around your house. We'll come back and meet you there about supper time."

"That's a bully idea," agreed Tom, "though I don't figure he's gone back to his old hangout. No man in his right senses would."

"But Simson isn't in his right senses!" cried Bob triumphantly.

Grave as the situation was, the boys laughed and even Big Chris smiled a little.

"Anyway," added Bob, "he might believe that the cave would be the last place *we* would think he'd go to —"

Ned, who had been saying very little, now came into the conversation with suddenness. His eyes were shining with the fire of his imagination.

"Gee whizz! P'raps — p'raps he left something in the cave and felt he had to get it! Maybe he had some of the stolen money with him and when we got him out he forgot it, sick as he was. It's like treasure hunting!"

"Jake Beasley didn't say anything 'bout any money," commented Tom's father. "I don't reckon you'll find any more treasure than ye'll crop a hundred bushel o' corn."

This rather scornful remark did not bother Ned and Bob much, for they had come to the Crossroads and were hurrying off in the direction of the Island before Big Chris was half through his speech.

The others gone, Tom felt it better policy not to argue with his father about the corn crop. When harvest came the facts would speak for themselves and anything he said now was only likely to anger the old man. Therefore he brought the discussion back to the chase of the missing bank embezzler.

"Did you look around for his tracks, Pop?"

"I searched around the house an' barn an' then took out straight for ye boys. I reckoned ye'd want to help!"

"Sure, we do!" was the answer.

"We should be able to find his tracks, sure enough," said Big Chris, after a short pause. "I reck'lect that I took his shoes away. He's got to be agoin' barefoot if he's agoin' at all!"

"Then that makes it easier, Pop. We'll find out which way he went."

By this time father and son had reached their farmyard. Without a word Tom raced over to the foot of the big tree which stood so close to the house. It was the same tree that had made possible his midnight journey through the swamp to warn Whiskers of danger. Hardly any grass was growing around, both on account of the shade the big tree afforded and the fact that the large number of chickens the farm boasted, scratched and pecked at their will. This treatment is very discouraging to grass.

After a moment's scrutiny, Tom shouted to his father:

"I've found his tracks, Dad! He came out of the window all right. Hurry up and come along. He started off this way."

His eyes bent on the ground, Tom led the way across the yard in the direction of the barn. The footprints were easy to distinguish in the beaten path, as they were the only marks of bare feet. Once past the barn, the trail grew harder to follow, for the path was narrower and the footprints only appeared at intervals. At

first Tom was a little puzzled and then he knew the reason. The Duke was weak and therefore he staggered. This accounted for the lapses in the marks he left, but there were enough to show that Simson had kept to the general direction of the path.

On Tom went, his father following patiently. The path ran towards the low grounds but to a portion of them that was some distance away from the island. Before they reached the fertile ground which was flooded by the freshets, a single track railway had to be crossed.

On the other side of this track, Tom could find no further traces of the man they were seeking.

"He's used the railroad just like the Indians waded along a brook when they wanted to throw people off the scent!" exclaimed Tom.

Big Chris growled his disgust. "What are we goin' to do now?" he wanted to know. "Can't we follow the railroad?"

"That's what we'll have to do. But the only trouble is that we don't know which way to go. He could have gone either."

"I figger that one way's as good as t'other,"

decided Big Chris, who evidently thought Tom had been the leader of the expedition long enough. "You walk along one side of the track an' I'll take t'other and then we can see when he leaves it for the woods."

Tom had no better plan, so they started to the north, examining carefully every foot of the ground they covered. After going perhaps a mile, Big Chris grew disgusted and suggested that they go back and work towards the south.

Dusk came on them and they were forced to give up the search with nothing accomplished. As they walked back toward the house, Tom realized that the disappointment his father felt was big — that the older man had evidently counted greatly on the possession of the money which would have been his if he could have turned Simson over to the authorities.

"I'm awfully sorry, Pop," he ventured, as they neared the house, "awfully sorry. But we'll win out to-morrow, don't worry!"

Big Chris so far forgot himself as to pat the boy on the shoulder. With the memory of that slight token of tenderness, Tom did justice to the supper set before him.

His chums had not returned from their expedition to the cave by the time supper was over, and Tom did not feel he could leave the house until they showed up.

While he waited, Ned and Bob were having adventures of their own.

When they had separated from Tom and his father, the two boys made as much speed as possible towards the island where the canoe was kept. By the time they were paddling upstream, Ned had converted Bob to his idea that while their trip might not result in any news of the Duke, yet there were other possibilities of adventure. They did not talk much, for haste was essential, as little daylight was left. Talking would take breath and they needed all the wind they had to battle with the current. The river had not entirely recovered from the effects of the storm which had so nearly cost the boys their crop and all the labor which had gone into its making. The current was still strong and they were in constant danger of collision with the driftwood which the swollen river had picked up and was whirling along to leave it stranded miles below.

"Great day!" exclaimed Ned, as they came in sight of the cave. "It sure looks deserted since Whiskers left!"

Bob agreed.

They pulled the *Hazard* up on the bank and explored the cave. Before leaving, Whiskers had made a trip there and brought away all the things he felt were of value, but at that he had left quite a pile of discarded things in one corner of the cavern.

Ned was examining this pile when he gave a whoop of joy.

"What is it?" called Bob, from the entrance. "Found a gold mine?"

"Pretty nearly as good!" was the answer. "Here's that old lantern the Duke had and there's some oil left in it still."

"That's fine! It will be a lot more useful than our old candles if we want to go into the gun chamber."

"Of course we'll want to go there," Ned cried. "You can just bet on that!"

"All right, all right, we'll go then, but I think we had better take a look around the mouth of the tunnel up on the cliff. That's the way the

Duke would try to get in if he has come back up here."

Ned saw the wisdom of this and suggested, "Well, then, you go up and see what's to be seen. I'll try and clean up this old lantern while you're gone!"

It was not long before Bob was back.

"Nothing doing up there," he reported. "Hasn't been anybody there since the rain. I guess that the Duke wasn't able to swim the swollen river even if it was his plan to come back here."

"Shucks!" cried Ned at last. "I don't believe that he even tried to swim the river. Anyhow, it can't be helped if he did. Come on, let's see what we can find in the gun chamber. I've got a hunch there's something waiting for us."

He lighted the lantern and while it was no searchlight, it gave a very satisfactory glow.

"Let's try to get through this way," proposed Ned. "It is shorter to the chamber if we can only manage to climb into the hole in the top of the cave."

Bob gave Ned a leg up and after much

scrambling the latter got into the passage. It was Bob's turn, but try as he would, he could not reach far enough to grasp Ned's helping hand, which was thrust from the opening.

"Go ahead," Bob said at last, when he realized after several tries that he could not get up this way. "I'll go around to the top entrance and meet you in the chamber." With this, he started off.

His previous trips through the tunnel now stood Bob in good stead, for he was able to go ahead with perfect assurance as to what lay before him. Therefore, it was not many minutes before he saw the glimmer of Ned's lantern around a turn in the passage.

"Found anything?" he asked, as he came out of the narrow tunnel and stood upright.

"Not yet," returned Ned hopefully, hardly looking up from the job he was engaged upon. He was moving one of the piles of muskets that were stacked against the wall of the chamber. "But this bunch of guns looked as if it had been moved. Lend a hand and we'll see what we can find."

Thereupon, Bob set to work and before long

the whole pile had been put on the other side of the room.

"Nothing doing," announced Ned, after a careful search with the lantern revealed nothing of interest. "I reckon my hunch was rotten!"

It really looked as if that were the case, but Ned persisted in making a further examination of every nook and cranny in the cavern. Bob helped, but it was easy to see that his enthusiasm was gone.

"Come on, Ned," he urged at last. "Let's get out of here. It must be getting dark outside and there's no moon. It won't be a joke if we have to paddle home at night."

"All right, I s'pose we'll have to," the other said, regretfully. "But I still think there is something around here we'd like to have."

"Maybe, but we don't seem to be the ones to find it. Anyhow, it was just a hunch of yours." With this, he started through the passage leading to the opening in the cave.

"Let's go the other way," said Ned, paying no attention to Bob's remarks. "I searched that passage on the way in. The Duke might have hidden his — his — "

"His what?" demanded Bob.

"Oh, treasure or something!" exploded Ned. "It might be somewheres in the passage you came through!"

Bob contented himself with a mocking laugh.

"Laugh and show your ignorance!" Ned retorted, perilously close to anger. "Get out any way you like, but I'm going to make sure!"

His crutches made a sharp noise as they struck the stone floor of the chamber, carrying the determined boy across to the passage opening. Bob watched his friend duck into the tunnel and then, a little ashamed of having been so discouraging, followed.

The going was slow, for Ned examined every inch of the way with care. It was not until they reached the slightly larger space over which was the opening into the trench, that Bob opened his mouth again.

"Satisfied now, Ned?" he asked, preparing to pull himself up onto the ground. "It's mighty dark already. Better hurry!"

But a sharp exclamation escaped from the boy he addressed.

"What—what is it?" Bob cried.

"I've — I've found something," returned Ned excitedly.

"Get out! Have you really?"

"Yep!" but his voice had changed from a note of triumph to one of disappointment. "But it won't do us any good."

"Why?"

"Cause it's not treasure or anything like that — it's just a photograph!"

Bob bent over and scanned the cardboard, which Ned held under the dim light of the old lantern. It was an old-fashioned picture, such as is taken by photographers in small towns, and showed a pleasant-faced woman with two small children beside her.

"It must be the Duke's wife and kids!" Bob decided at length. "Unless it's Whiskers'."

"Couldn't be his. He never was in this part of the cave. Why, he never knew about it until we told him, and that was after he'd have any reason to come here!"

"I guess you're right," agreed Bob. "It belongs to the Duke." A new thought struck him. "Say, Ned, do you believe this was what made the poor nut try to escape? To get this?"

"It probably meant more to him than any money he might have hidden away," said young Moseley slowly. "That might be the answer."

"I think that it *is* the answer, Ned, really I do! There was something in that wild hunch of yours after all, I'll say that for you! It looks to me as if somebody ought to stay up here and head him off."

"The river hasn't gone down far enough yet," said Ned, after a moment's thought. "There's no way for him to get across. He couldn't swim it without drowning and there's no boat or bridge for miles. I forgot about the freshet when I first thought about coming up here. It will give us time to go back and tell Tom what we've learned. Someone can come back up here in the morning if Tom hasn't got on his trail by then. Let's be moving!"

Night had fallen when the boys got back to the canoe, and they pushed off into the inky darkness with rather quaking hearts. Needless to say, either one would rather have been killed on the spot than to let the other know how he felt. So the trip home was accompanied by valiant efforts at cheerfulness. They sang and

laughed as they paddled, but both were heartily glad when the light craft grounded on the landing place at the Island.

Once ashore, Ned set the pace to Tom's house. His crutches fairly flew over the ground and it was all Bob could do to keep up with him.

"Great day in the morning!" panted Ned, as they drew in sight of the house, only to find every window dark. "It must be powerful late, because they have all gone to bed. What shall we do?"

"I'll bet that even if he's gone to bed, Tom's not asleep," said Bob. "I vote we see if we can't get him to the window. We don't want to wake Big Chris, though."

"Why not?" inquired Ned. "He wants to find the Duke as much as we do. He won't mind being waked up to hear our news."

"I know it, but I figure it will be a whole lot easier for Tom if we could only catch the Duke ourselves and turn him over again to Big Chris. See?"

"You're right. I hadn't thought about it that way," agreed Ned.

When they reached the house they circled it

noiselessly until they came to the side on which Tom's room was located. Gathering a handful of pebbles, Ned began tossing them up against the window.

He had used up the whole handful without a sign of Tom's appearance.

"Old Tom must have been so tired that he dropped off to sleep," suggested Bob in a whisper. "Throw several of 'em this time!"

Ned took the suggestion and fired a volley at the window glass. The stones tinkled quite loudly and both boys held their breath waiting for the result.

There was a result, but not the one for which they had hoped.

A head was stuck out of the window, only, to their horror, it was not Tom's, but the shaggy head of his father!

"What's the matter, ye young scamps? Wakin' up a decent house like this!" Big Chris thundered.

"We — we've just got back from the cave and we wanted to — to tell Tom," began Bob.

"What did ye want to tell him?" demanded the man. "Did ye find anything?"

"Yes, sir — that is, nothin' much. Not enough to bother you with."

But any news was of interest to Big Chris at this time.

"Hold your hosses a minute," he said. "I'll fetch Tom and then ye can tell us what ye've learned."

"I reckon there's nothing to it but to tell him," said Ned, as the white head was pulled inside the window. "We've let ourselves in for it. Don't you — "

But this remark was never to be finished, for just at that moment Big Chris burst out of the front door, an overcoat pulled on over his nightshirt.

"Tom's gone!" he shouted. "Ain't in the house, nowheres!"

All Bob could do was to repeat dully, "Tom gone?"

"Yes," cried the old man. "Went to bed in the same room Simson was in. Now Tom's gone too!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE CHASE ENDS

Ned Moseley tried to reassure the old man.

"Tom's all right, Mr. Wickham. I'll bet he's somewheres near. He can take care of himself."

"Perhaps he got tired of waiting for us and went down to the Island. He might have missed us as we came up," suggested Bob, but there was no conviction in his tone. Big Chris, however, felt this was a good explanation of the matter and seemed much relieved.

"We'll go down and see, Mr. Wickham," offered Ned. "You don't have to come."

But Tom's father would not agree to this. He insisted on going along and the only concession they could get from him was that he would go in and put on his clothes. But before he left them, Bob asked what he and Tom had discovered during the afternoon.

"Didn't find out anything," replied Big Chris. "The feller's tracks led down to the railroad

and then we lost 'em." With this he went into the house to put on some clothes. While he was gone the boys got a lantern from the barn and lighted it.

"Let's have another squint at that picture," suggested Bob, as they waited for Big Chris' reappearance. "This is a lot better light."

Ned pulled the cardboard from his pocket and handed it to his chum.

"Nice looking lady, ain't she?" he said at last. "The Duke must have been in an awful hole to do anything that would hurt her." As he spoke, he turned the picture over carelessly. "Great day, Ned. Look here. I wonder what's all this funny stuff written on the back?"

Ned was quite as mystified as Bob when he saw the strange hodgepodge of letters and figures scrawled on the reverse of the picture.

"Do you think it can be a puzzle?" he suggested. "It doesn't look like anything else to me."

"He wouldn't write a puzzle down on that picture," said Bob, as much to himself as to his companion. "It must be some sort of directions, a sort of reminder —"

"You've hit it," exclaimed Ned. "I'll bet a pretty you've hit it! That's a memorandum of the place he's left the money he took from the bank — buried it likely! I felt sure we were treasure hunting when we went up to the cave!"

There might be something in what Ned had to say, Bob had to admit to himself, especially as he could think of no other explanation for the queer figures. Before he could say anything more on the subject, Big Chris came out of the house.

Ned whispered as they went up to meet the man. "We'll show him the photo but don't let him see the back of it if you can help it!"

"Ready, sir?" Bob asked as they came close to Mr. Wickham.

"All right," was the gruff reply. The man was worried about his son, and the fact that these other boys were witnesses of what he felt was a weakness, worried him still further. Therefore he endeavored to conceal his feelings by a rough manner.

"Mightn't it be a good stunt to take along Tom's dogs?" ventured Ned. "If we get close to him, Minnie or Rush ought to find him."

"Good idea; I'll call 'em," grudged Big Chris, and started to whistle for the hounds. There was no answering scamper of paws. The night lay still after each clear call.

"That's right," commented Bob. "They haven't been around since we came back. I was so excited I didn't notice that they were not barking their heads off!"

"Tom let 'em go along with him, I reckon," said Ned. "Otherwise they'd be here."

When the dogs did not come to a final call, Mr. Wickham started forward on the way to the Island. He had accepted the fact that the dogs had gone with his son and did not think it worth while to make any comment. Bob and Ned trailed after.

Hardly were they outside the yard when Big Chris shot a question at them.

"What did ye find at the cave? See any sign of Simson?"

Bob was careful to answer only the second question.

"No, sir. The river is still too high for him to swim to the other side."

"I knew that afore you-all started out, but

I figgered ye were so set on goin' 'twouldn't do ye any harm to take the trip and be disappointed." A chuckle escaped from the man, but there was no mirth in it that the boys could discover. "But did ye find anything else? Ye said ye had something to tell Tom when I come to the winder — ye can tell it to me. Come on, now!"

"All we found was this photograph, sir." Bob held it up to the lantern so it could be seen. He took good care to keep the back of the cardboard hid.

Big Chris looked at the picture a moment and then remarked, "I don't rightly see why you-all figgered that thing was important enough to git my boy Tom out o' his bed for."

Both boys felt relieved. Tom's father evidently did not see that this photograph could in all probability be a greater magnet to the poor unbalanced Simson than all the treasure in the world. And they did not take any pains to enlighten him. It would be time enough when they had had a talk with Tom, who had disappeared so completely.

"Why, we just thought Tom would like to

know," returned Ned with elaborate carelessness. "Besides, we didn't have any idea it was so late and we wanted to know what plans you and he had made for the morning." As he said this he slipped the picture back in his pocket.

Satisfied that the boys had gone on a wild goose chase, Big Chris stalked ahead at so lively a pace that Bob and Ned were soon outdistanced. This, however, gave them a chance to discuss the situation.

"Great day, but that was lucky, wasn't it?" Ned began in a low tone.

"You bet," was the fervent reply. "The next thing is to find Tom and decide who will go up to the cave and watch for the Duke."

Ned hesitated a moment before replying. At last it came.

"Bob, I don't think Tom came down to meet us —"

"What do you think then?"

"That he had a hunch and is off to hunt Simson all by himself. I didn't say anything about it when Big Chris took your suggestion so well, but I thought so then."

"Me too," said Bob. "It's a cinch old Tom isn't letting the grass grow under his feet. But I wish I knew where he was. I'd feel a lot happier."

"So would I. But it's no use wishing, because there's no way of finding out, at any rate until morning."

By this time the Island was near. From ahead they heard Big Chris shout: "Tom! Tom!" only to have the sound die away without any answering hail.

As they stood thus, eyes and ears straining in the darkness, a queer moving noise came to them. The light of their lantern penetrated only a little ways into the gloom and hardly took the edge off the mystery of the dark.

It was a queer noise they heard: a crackling of brush, the pat-pat of light feet. Visions of large and fierce animals came to them. Of course, they knew that no such beasts remained in the country around them, but this knowledge did not have much effect against the fact that something — *something* — was coming to them through the night.

Really scared, they stood stockstill, waiting.

They did not even call out to Big Chris. Possibly they forgot he was within call. Their minds were intent on the mystifying thing that was coming towards them.

Nearer and nearer it came, the noise growing louder. Now they could hear the pant of quick breaths coming from the creature. Nearer it came — nearer —

Then, into the circle of the lantern light, flashed a black and white shape.

"Wow!" said Ned weakly. "Huh, it's Rush!"

When they recovered they saw that the dog was covered with lather and sweat. They called to Big Chris, who started towards them. When he came up and saw the dog, he said:

"I reckon Tom must be somewheres around if Rush is here."

"I don't think so, sir," Bob replied. "If Tom was near, Rush wouldn't be so all-fired friendly with us. He's been jumping up and licking our hands since he found us."

"Listen to him whine," put in Ned. "It's almost as if he wanted something!"

"That's just it!" cried Bob. "He's been

with Tom. Tom's in some sort of a hole and he sent Rush for help!"

"Just like the St. Bernard dogs in the Alps," said Ned, who was a great reader. "Come on—"

"Foolishness," Big Chris growled. "Plumb foolishness!"

This dampened the boys' spirits for only a moment.

"Anyway, I'm going to follow Rush," asserted Bob. "Coming, Ned?"

"You bet!" was the reply. "Hark on, Rush; go find 'em, boy!"

At the word the hound leaped out of the circle of light in the general direction of the railroad. The boys started after the dog, without a word to Big Chris. Before they had covered much ground, the dog flashed back, looking at them reproachfully.

"All right, Rush, old boy," soothed Bob, "we're coming. The critter thinks we ought to be able to go as fast as he can, Ned," he finished with a chuckle.

This time Rush did not run so far ahead, but kept close to the boys, whining his encour-

agement. When they reached the railroad, the dog set off towards the south. Here the going was surer and better time was made. At the spot where the path from Tom's house crossed the railroad, the boys half expected the dog to turn off, but Rush made no attempt to leave the track.

About half a mile farther, the dog suddenly gave a sharp bark and dashed from the track, in towards the river. Bob and Ned followed.

"It's the sand pit!" exclaimed Ned. "And Rush is making for the cars. Come on; let's hurry!" And he started off on one of his famous three legged dashes with which Bob had difficulty in keeping up.

The sand pit was a field of almost pure sand, which the railroad had found useful for ballasting their tracks. They had made an arrangement with Mr. Moseley by which they had the privilege to lay in a spur track and pay a certain amount for each car of sand they took out. The pit was in constant operation and seldom was the sidetrack empty.

Reaching the edge of the excavation, they found Rush waiting for them, quivering with

excitement. As soon as he was sure he was being followed, he slipped down the steep bank.

"After him," cried Ned and, sitting down, slid to the bottom. Before he reached his feet, Bob was beside him, the only casualty being that the lantern had gone out.

"Don't bother to light it," advised Ned. "Dawn's coming. Look how gray it's getting over in the east."

Before he had finished, both boys had started towards the freight cars that now were dimly visible. But what lent speed to their final spurt was the sound of an encouraging yell that came from the direction in which they were going.

"It's Tom!" panted Ned. "He's — he's all right!"

Bob did not answer. He was too busy running. As they got nearer to their goal, the figure of Tom outlined itself on the top of one of the box cars.

"I've got him, fellows! I've got him!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

Bob and Ned drew up, blown, beside the car on which Tom was perched.

"You've got him? Where?" Bob managed to ask between gasps.

"Right here. I'm sitting on him. That is, I'm sitting on the lid to the icebox of this refrigerator car and — and — "

"And the Duke's on ice?" cried Ned.

"That's about it, only there's no ice. This car must be an old one or it wouldn't be used for carting sand."

By this time the other boys had recovered their wind and had joined Tom on top of the car.

"But how in thunder did you get him in there? And how did you find him? And — and — "

"Have a heart," chuckled Tom. "I'll tell you all about it, but first I want to know where

Rush found you. I thought you'd never come."

"We were over on the hill near the Island," said Bob. "Your father was with us — "

"Pop with you?" echoed Tom. "I thought Rush would find either you or Pop, but not both of you."

"We woke him up when we tried to get you to the window at the house. When he found you were gone, he had to come out and hunt. We thought you might have come down to the Island to meet us — "

Tom interrupted Bob's explanation to know what luck they had had.

"All we could find was a photograph of the Duke's wife and kids," was the answer. "We'll show it to you when it gets light enough — there's something funny written on the back too."

Here Ned broke in —

"The old photo can wait. Tom's adventures are what I want to hear about. But, Tom, it's lucky Rush found us instead of Big Chris!"

"Why?"

"'Cause I don't reckon he'd have followed the pup. When we started with Rush as a guide,

your father said it was all plumb foolishness. We left him — "

"I reckon he's thought better of it by now, for here he comes," laughed Tom and pointed across the field to a figure that was coming towards them through the gray morning mists. "I'll wait so he can be here too when I tell you all how I trapped the Duke."

Bob and Ned had to be content with this.

"But, Tom, Rush certainly is a smart houn' dog to come and find us. How did you get him to do it?" It was Bob who wanted to know.

"Oh, I've been training him to fetch things for me and I figured that if I ever got hurt and in the woods it would come in handy if I could be sure that Rush would go get help. I've got him so that all I have to do is double up like I had a tummy-ache and Rush will streak it for the house. I did that to-night and evidently when he got to the house and couldn't find anyone, he went off on your hot trail."

"He's sure some pup!" was Ned's enthusiastic comment.

Just then Big Chris came up.

"Well, what's the meetin' about?" he

snapped. "Get me out here traipsin' through the night huntin' ye, when the whole passel o' ye have a right to be in bed. What's it all about?"

"I — I had an idea I might find the Duke so's you might have him to turn over when the sheriff came," said Tom rather hesitatingly, as if he had merited the rebuke.

"Ye might have come on home when ye found out ye was wrong," suggested the boy's father severely. Bob and Ned could hardly restrain their desire to shout out the whole thing.

"Yes, sir. But it just struck me after we went to bed that Simson might have followed the track to the switch where this siding begins and then walked up here. You see, Pop, we went right by the switch when we looked yesterday afternoon."

Big Chris Wickham did not make any comment, so Tom continued.

"I sort of figured it out that if the Duke had done that he would probably have been too tired to go on after dark and that one of the cars would be a good hiding place in which

to rest enough to start off again this morning." Again he paused for some remark from his father. But Big Chris would not commit himself.

"So I just slipped out of the window and came down to find out. When I got to the first car and looked in, the Duke jumped on me —"

"*What?*" came the startled cry from Big Chris. "And — and he got away?"

"For a minute or two. I was so surprised that I let him go. We dodged around the cars for a few minutes and then something made him climb up to the top of the car here. I don't know what he thought he would gain by the plan. Then I came after him as fast as I could. Golly!" — Tom drew a long breath — "but it must have been a pretty scrap up here while it lasted. We almost went over the edge a couple of times, but we didn't. Then something lucky happened. That is, lucky for me. The poor fellow's head hit a sharp corner and he wasn't any more trouble. He wasn't hurt badly, so I knew I only had a moment or two in which to put him in a safe place."

"Why didn't you lock him inside the car?" exclaimed Bob.

"I couldn't get him down without throwing him over the side," explained Tom. "It was the edge of this icebox lid that had put the Duke down and out, and as it was so handy, I just dumped him in there and sat on the cover. He was safe as long as I sat there, I knew, but the latch was broken off so I could not fasten it and go away for help." As Tom finished he looked down at his father, who was staring up at him incredulously. "You see, Pop, my idea turned out right."

Big Chris was dazed with the surprise Tom had given him. At last he spoke, for he was a just man.

"Ye did a good piece o' work, Tom, I'll say that for ye. An' I'm right glad for ye to have the reward —"

"But — but the reward is yours, isn't it, fellows?" Tom protested quickly. They assented eagerly.

"I can't see it that way," returned the man slowly. "It belongs to Tom."

"Not at all, sir. The cement bags and —

and your work at the Island the night of the freshet, make it yours. Just because he got away makes no difference!"

The farmer needed the money too greatly to resist his son's urging long. The way in which they put it was plausible and soon he was convinced that in justice the reward belonged to him.

"Ye are good boys, all of ye," he said at last by way of thanks. "Reckon we might git the Duke feller out o' that there hole now an' take him to the house. It's full day now."

When at last Simson was out in the light, he proved to be a pitiful object. He had relapsed into the state of listlessness which had come over him when they had taken him from the cave. Dirty, his hands all cut and face scratched, he did not look the criminal of romance. He had to be carried almost all the way to the house, for the stony ground had cut his feet, unused as they were to being unprotected. Once there, Big Chris locked him in the corn crib.

As soon as they had the prisoner safe, the boys realized how tired they were. They were

able, however, to keep awake until Mrs. Wickham had served up some food and a hot cup of coffee. After this they made for the barn with one accord. In the hayloft they attempted to discuss the details of the events just past, but sleep soon discouraged them. A few minutes later each was dreaming.

The sun was high when Tom woke. Arousing the others, he exclaimed:

"I hope the sheriff hasn't been here while we've been loafing. Hurry up; let's go down and see!"

They had not delayed a minute too long, for when they came into the barnyard, the sheriff was already in his carriage with the Duke sitting dazedly at his side. There was a stranger on the front seat, besides. Evidently the Duke was about to leave them, this time for good.

The boys got to the carriage before it rolled off and were in time to hear the stranger on the front seat say to Big Chris:

"And you're sure that nothing was found on him? No papers or memoranda or anything?"

Big Chris was sure. The stranger shook his head sadly.

"That's too bad. Simson took away a lot of bonds and things he couldn't turn into money and unless he gets his senses back, we'll never be able to find them."

As the stranger was speaking, Ned suddenly remembered the photograph that still reposed in his pocket and which he had forgotten entirely in the rush of events.

"Stop!" he cried as the sheriff told the driver to start off. "Wait a moment!"

The stranger turned and noticed the boys for the first time. "What is it, my boy?" he asked.

"We — we found this!" Ned said, pulling out the cardboard. "It's got some writing on the back!"

The man snatched the picture and an exclamation of pleasure escaped him.

"You have given me just what I wanted," he said. "This tells me where he secreted the papers. I am the vice-president of the bank where poor Simson was employed and my being able to recover these papers will make it easier for him. I can't tell you how obliged I am. Tell me: how did you find it?"

Before the stranger would let the carriage go on, the boys had to tell him the whole story of their connection with Simson. When they had finished, he said that they deserved a reward too and, pulling out a big wallet, fished some bills from it and handed them to Ned. "Divide it," he directed.

"Whoop-ee!" yelled Bob, who had looked over Ned's shoulder. "It's a hundred and fifty dollars. That's fifty dollars apiece!"

But the carriage had started. When it had turned the corner of the road, little Simson, alias the Duke of Wellington, had passed out of their lives forever.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HARVEST

At last the final cultivation was over, bringing with it weary backs and arms. The stalks had grown tall and strong, while the green ears had lengthened and thickened. Each stalk carried a heavy burden of the grain and the boys felt proud and confident of the result. The work on the Island had been a pleasant contrast to the exciting events which had marked the final exit from the scene of Whiskers and the Duke.

Late in August a letter from Mr. Elwood reminded them that it was time to collect the ears from which next year's seed corn should come.

"Let's take enough so we can supply Uncle Eddy and your father," suggested Ned. "If we make a big crop they'll be glad to have it."

"Good idea," assented Tom. When they brought the corn to the barn, they found that Mr. Elwood's method of stringing the ears was

easy. They caught on to it in a minute and soon the ears they had selected were hanging from the barn rafters, where only dry air could reach them.

"How shall we harvest?" asked Ned one day. "Cut and stack in shocks or husk from the stalk?"

Tom was ready with his answer.

"I reckon our best plan will be to let the corn stay in the field until the kernels are hard. The corn keeps better that way. Then husk the ears right off the stalk. The fodder won't be worth the long haul to the house."

"As an experienced farmer," said Bob, laughingly, "I perfectly agree with you."

"Anyhow, Big Chris can turn his stock in here as soon as we've harvested, so the fodder won't all be wasted," Ned commented. "How long will it be before we can begin, Tom?"

"Long after school opens," was the reply. "Not until the kernel is quite hard and the husk is dry. Some time in October, I reckon."

"But, Tom," exploded Bob, "if we can't tell how much of a crop we've made, what will Big Chris do about letting you stay in school?"

"I'm jiggered if I know," returned the farmer's son. "He'll probably keep me home. I've been expecting it, so I won't be much disappointed. Don't worry about me, fellows; it's all right."

"Rotten luck, old boy," consoled Bob. "Why can't the old corn be ready for harvest now? Unfair to us, I call it."

"Even if he does keep me home," Tom said cheerfully, "when we measure our harvest he will *have* to let me go back to school — because we're going to win! It just means two months' delay, that's all."

But Big Chris kept his own counsel and although the boys tried, they could gather nothing from him regarding his intentions towards Tom. Their work on the Island was finished for the time being, so the unexpected arrival of two enthusiastic gentlemen from Washington was very welcome, as it helped to keep their minds off their troubles. The newcomers were from the Smithsonian Institute and had been sent by Whiskers to see of what value were the relics the boys had found in the gun chamber of the cave.

The guiding of these men to the cave took up much of the time that hung heavy on their hands. It was fun to see the rather sedate professors wriggling through the narrow passages leading to the interesting room. The latter were delighted with the find and expressed themselves as more than satisfied with the result of their trip.

"Although it would be premature to say definitely," one of them observed after emerging from the cave for the first time, "I think that the Institute will remunerate you lads sufficiently — quite sufficiently, if I may say so."

Whiskers' dugout, which he had presented to the boys, proved to be the best means of taking the guns and other relics to civilization and, as only a few could be carried at a time, several more days were profitably passed.

Too soon, however, the professors left with their booty and all the young farmers had to think about was their crop, and, of course, what would be Tom's fate.

As the day for the opening of school drew near, the fear that Big Chris would not let Tom start the session on time, grew more pronounced.

Tom, who was most concerned, refused to talk about the matter at all. Such of the time as he could get off from his father, he spent with his chums, and he was the cheeriest of the bunch.

Not until the very day before Brother Eddy would tinkle his little bell at nine o'clock to mark the beginning of a new school year, did Big Chris express himself.

The young farmers had been on a trip to the Island to look at their stand of corn, which was now mature. Here and there the leaves had begun to turn yellow, promising that the day of harvest would not be long in coming. Approaching the Big House, they found Big Chris in deep conversation with Mr. Moseley before the barn door. As they came up, he greeted them with a roar.

"Still think that book-learnin' will make a hundred bushel crop for ye, eh? Been down to look it over, eh?"

"We've looked at it and still think we'll make at least a hundred bushels," returned Ned respectfully.

The big man laughed. "Ye do, do ye? Well,

I still *know* ye can't! Ye needn't try to explain. Facts is facts, and an acre don't grow a hundred bushel in these parts. I been down to the Island myself and ye young scamps have raised a mighty pretty patch o' corn, I'll say that for ye, an' — an' " — his voice shook a little — " an' I'm ready to do the right thing. You, Tom," he raised his voice suddenly, " ye're agoin' to school here to Brother Moseley this winter, ye hear me? I don't want no complaints about it, neither, 'cause what I say goes — "

This was a bombshell of surprise. It caught the boys unawares and struck them speechless. Brother Eddy was delighted. One could see that from the smile that broke out all over his face. Tom, who had listened with incredulous ears, made a leap for his father and held out his hand.

" Pop," he stammered, " Pop, I — I can't tell you how grateful — "

" Get along with ye," returned the old man.

" But aren't you going to tell Tom what you just told me? " asked Mr. Moseley with a quiet smile, " About the reward you got for turning over Simpson to the sheriff? "

Big Chris' weatherbeaten red face turned a deeper red.

"Why — why, Brother Moseley," he almost stammered, "I — I didn't aim for to tell that yet awhile. I — I — "

"I'll tell it now if you don't," said the schoolmaster.

"Well," started the farmer, a little shamefacedly, "I figgered that there money I got didn't rightly belong to me, though they plumb convinced me that it did, I'll say that for myself, an' — an' — an' I figgered that as Tom's so set on this here ag-gri-cult'ral school business, it oughter be used that way 'cause rightly the money belongs to the boys. Not that I believe in all that newfangled foolishness," he hastened to add, "but I always have been a just man an' I don't figger to quit now."

"But what are you going to do with it?" queried Tom, greatly excited.

"Send ye to the farm college if ye still want to go; an' — an' mebbe I'd go along too just to see what sort of hocus-pocus they call farmin' there."

"Hooray!" yelled the boys, realizing that

even if they failed to make a hundred-bushel crop, they had achieved a far greater result: that of getting Big Chris interested in modern farming. He had been forced to acknowledge that what they had done was an advance over old style methods, and when he realized this he wanted to learn too. But it had been mighty hard for him to own up.

All at once, waking to the fact that he had given himself away, Big Chris bellowed sternly at his son:

"Ye got to behave at school or I'll know the reason why, ye young limb!" and without saying more he walked off in the direction of his farm.

"Wasn't that bully of him?" asked Bob Hazard, his eyes shining. "Perfectly bully of him?"

"Now it won't make so much difference if we don't make over a hundred bushels to the acre," broke in Ned. "Tom can go to school anyway."

"But it does — it makes even more difference," returned Tom, feelingly. "We have *got* to make a hundred bushels so that Pop will feel

right about doing what he has. I'll bet he'd be more disappointed, really, if we failed, than we'd be ourselves."

"Right you are," Bob admitted.

After a moment Ned said thoughtfully, "I see it that way, too, but at first I figured he'd feel bad if we proved him wrong."

"I think he *wanted* to be proved wrong," said Brother Eddy, as he left the group and went to the house, leaving the boys to talk over these tremendous happenings.

With school to fill up the greater part of the day, the time passed quickly. Soon after the first frost Tom felt that the corn was hard enough to harvest. The reports of the measured acre that were to be sent to Mr. Elwood and to Washington were all in shape except for the most important entry, that of the final yield. It was on the return of this acre that any prize score was to be figured. The remaining part of the field was not considered. Ned had been the bookkeeper and had carefully noted just what expenditures in money and labor they had made on this acre. To simplify this work,

Mr. Elwood had sent them a schedule of charges they should make and, as all the other boys who were growing corn throughout the country, used it too, when the final results were sent in, all were judged alike. They had to charge for each boy's labor at ten cents an hour and each horse at five cents, manure at one dollar a light wagon load, and so on down the list.

As soon as school was out the next day, Pony was hitched to the light wagon. When they got to the field, Big Chris was already there to act as witness to the fact that only the corn from the measured acre was harvested as from that acre. The job of husking corn was new only to Bob Hazard, but he soon caught on and shortly the gleaming yellow ears were flying from his hands into the wagon body almost as rapidly as they were from his friends'.

The pile of ears in the wagon grew larger and larger. Big Chris became almost as excited as the boys when the wagon was full and the acre seemed hardly touched. Before night came, Pony made four trips to the barn with a precious load. The next day being Saturday,

the boys had the whole day for their harvesting, and it was not until afternoon that the acre was exhausted of its wealth.

Tom's father accompanied the boys on the last trip to the barn, joining in the discussion as to the probability of their having succeeded in their aim.

"Ye've got more off'n the acre than I reckoned ye would," he stated, "a heap more, but it *ain't* a hundred bushel, that's sure." When they arrived at the barn, Brother Eddy was waiting, a notebook in his hand. The excitement was so great that even Sister Elly was on hand to see what the result would be.

The boys added what they had brought on the last trip to the already large pile that lay on the ground in front of the barn. Then they brought out the scales, which Mr. Moseley tested and found correct.

The ears were put into baskets and placed on the scales. Big Chris weighed the baskets, calling off the figures to Brother Eddy, who entered the results in his book. In this fashion the whole yield was weighed. When they had finished, the boys demanded the total.

"It's very important to go slowly, very important," returned the schoolmaster. "We must get this right." He figured busily for a moment and then announced:

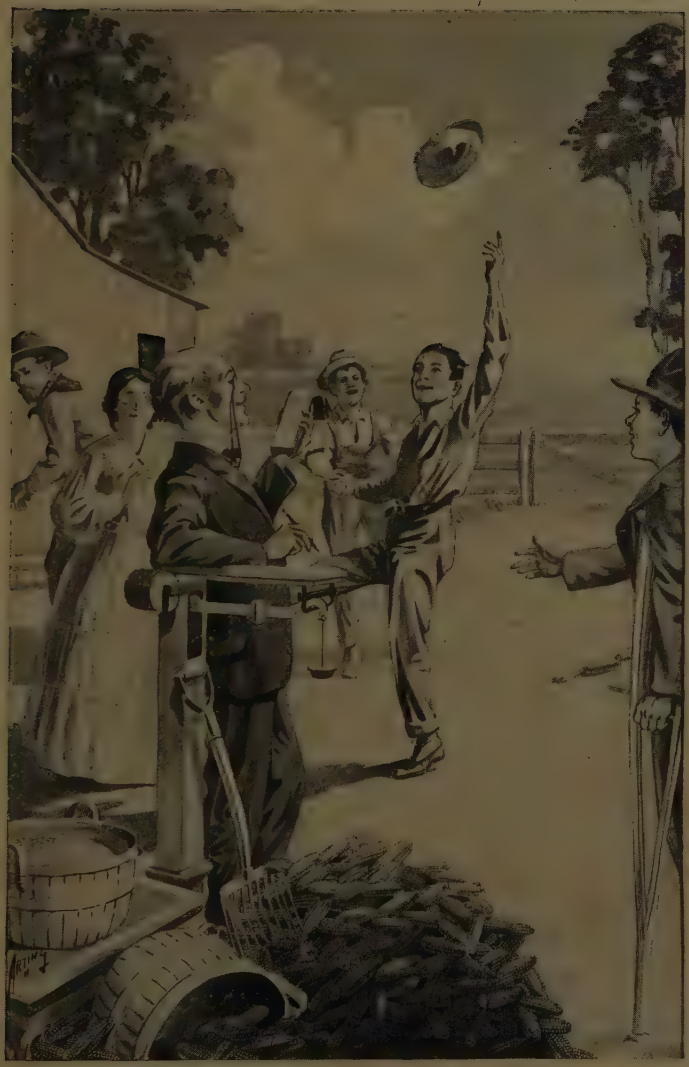
"Seven thousand, two hundred and eighty-two pounds."

Tom led the cheer that followed this news.

"Easy, easy," cautioned Mr. Moseley. "I know that sounds good, but it's only the start. Now we've got to find what percentage of this weight is in the cob. To do this we have to weigh two lots of a hundred pounds each. Take them from different parts of the pile."

When they had two piles of just one hundred pounds each, the boys took them inside the barn and ran the ears through the corn sheller, taking care that each pile should be kept separate. Then they brought the shelled corn out and weighed it again. From these figures Brother Eddy quickly arrived at the average percentage of shelled corn in the whole yield.

"It's about five parts corn to one of cob. Applying it to your whole whole crop, gives you six thousand and seventy pounds of dry shelled corn and —"



Bob threw his cap high in the air. "We've made over one hundred bushels to the acre!"

"And if we divide by fifty-six pounds, which a bushel weighs, we've made over one hundred bushels an acre! Great day in the morning!" And Bob threw his cap high in the air.

"Exactly eight and a fraction bushels over." Mr. Moseley tried to make himself heard, but the boys were too busy congratulating each other at the tops of their voices for his mild tone to penetrate.

"Well, Mr. Wickham, we did it," began Ned, wickedly, when a lull in the proceedings came. But he spoke to empty air. Big Chris had quietly moved away when it was certain that the crop would be over a hundred bushels.

"Don't plague him to-night, boys," said Brother Eddy. "The result was a little hard on him, even though I believe he hoped for it. To-morrow he will be all right!"

And he was. The next morning he even congratulated Tom on the fine crop, but failed to mention it in definite figures. There was one consolation coming for Big Chris, however. When the boys harvested the corn from the remainder of their five acres and measured it, they found that they had not done as well as on

the one acre. Altogether, the average of the five acres, counting in their champion plot, was less than a hundred bushels. However, it was not far from it.

When Tom told his father this news, it cheered up the old man greatly. Somehow it gave him back a little of the self-respect he felt he had lost when the boys had proved what they could do in opposition to his opinions. They had claimed they could raise over a hundred bushels an acre and they hadn't done it. That one acre should have come up to their expectations was a fluke — it could have happened to anyone.

As soon after harvest as possible, Ned had finished up the report and sent it to Washington, a copy going by the same mail to Mr. Elwood. Brother Eddy and Big Chris signed them as witnesses.

It wasn't long before they had a reply. The postman came by at recess time one day and whistled at the front gate.

The letter he gave Ned was long and very impressive with all its important looking decorations of sealing wax. Besides, it was postmarked Washington.

"Hurry and open it, Ned," cried Bob. "It's from Mr. Elwood, isn't it?"

"Can't tell; it's typewritten," returned the other boy. "No, it's from the Smithsonian people."

"What does it say? Shake a leg, Ned; don't be all day —"

"Keep your shirt on — I'm doing the best I can. Great day, fellows, they've sent each of us a check for one hundred dollars just for happening on that gun chamber. I reckon that's bad luck, eh? I — I can get that wireless outfit I wanted now."

"And mine will help to buy a piece of land all our own," exulted Tom.

"I'm going to send for a set of engineering books, I guess," said Bob, "and a pair of high laced boots like engineers wear —"

The other boys laughed good-naturedly. They were too happy to poke fun at their friend who, since Whiskers' departure, had only one thought and that was of the time when he would be a full-fledged engineer.

"But you dropped a paper from the envelope," observed Tom, stooping down and recovering it.

"Why it's from Mr. Elwood — and it's about our crop. Listen," and he began to read:

"'Dear Fellows:

"'I was glad to get your report and see what a splendid showing you made with your corn. However, I have a disappointment for you. Your record was just a bushel under the lowest prize winner, so this year you will have to be content with what the crop itself brings you in the way of reward. I believe that if you think about it for a moment you will realize that the good work you did and the results you attained under such adverse circumstances are gratifying in themselves and I'll be much surprised if you do not vote that the summer just passed was the best of your lives. You chaps are pioneers and I congratulate you and at the same time thank you for the help you have given me and better farming conditions generally by your good work.

Very sincerely yours,

John D. Elwood.

"P. S. The checks from the Institute

ought to help chase any grouch you might have about losing a prize.

J. D. E.'"

"That's some tough — to be nosed out by a bushel."

"But Mr. Elwood's right," said Ned, in answer to Bob's outburst, "it's the work that counts, not the prize. It's been a wonderful summer."

"You can just bet your life on that," said Tom heartily. "Whatever we all do in the future, we'll have this summer to look back on. We did our best and had a peach of a time doing it."

"Then you don't care if we didn't win a prize?" queried Ned.

"What could be better than making both my Dad and Brother Eddy come around to modern farming methods? That is worth all the prizes in the world."

When Tom Wickham got home that night he found Big Chris had deserted his newspaper for the pile of farmers' bulletins the boy had so carefully saved. The old man lifted his head at his son's entrance and smiled.

"Been waitin' for ye to come home, Tom. What do ye think o' putting up one o' these here cribs to keep seed corn through the winter? The book here specifies it's worth the trouble."

"Fine, Pop," answered the boy enthusiastically. "We can use up that pile of rough-edge lumber the sawmill left down by the river. It won't cost much if we do the work ourselves."

When bedtime came, the new firm of Big Chris Wickham and Son had planned many improvements.

"Good night, Pop," called Tom, as he went upstairs. "I'll bet we'll have a farm all our own in a year or two!"

The old man answered and then went to the door of the house. Spread before him under the gray-silver light of the moon, lay the broad fields, fringed with piny woods, lying fallow. Slowly, as if in a dream, he saw the fields filled with tremendous crops, many men busy about them.

"Tom's and mine!" he said softly to himself. "Tom's and mine!"

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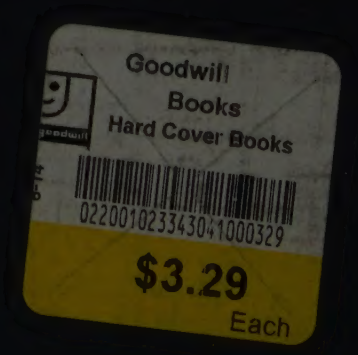
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